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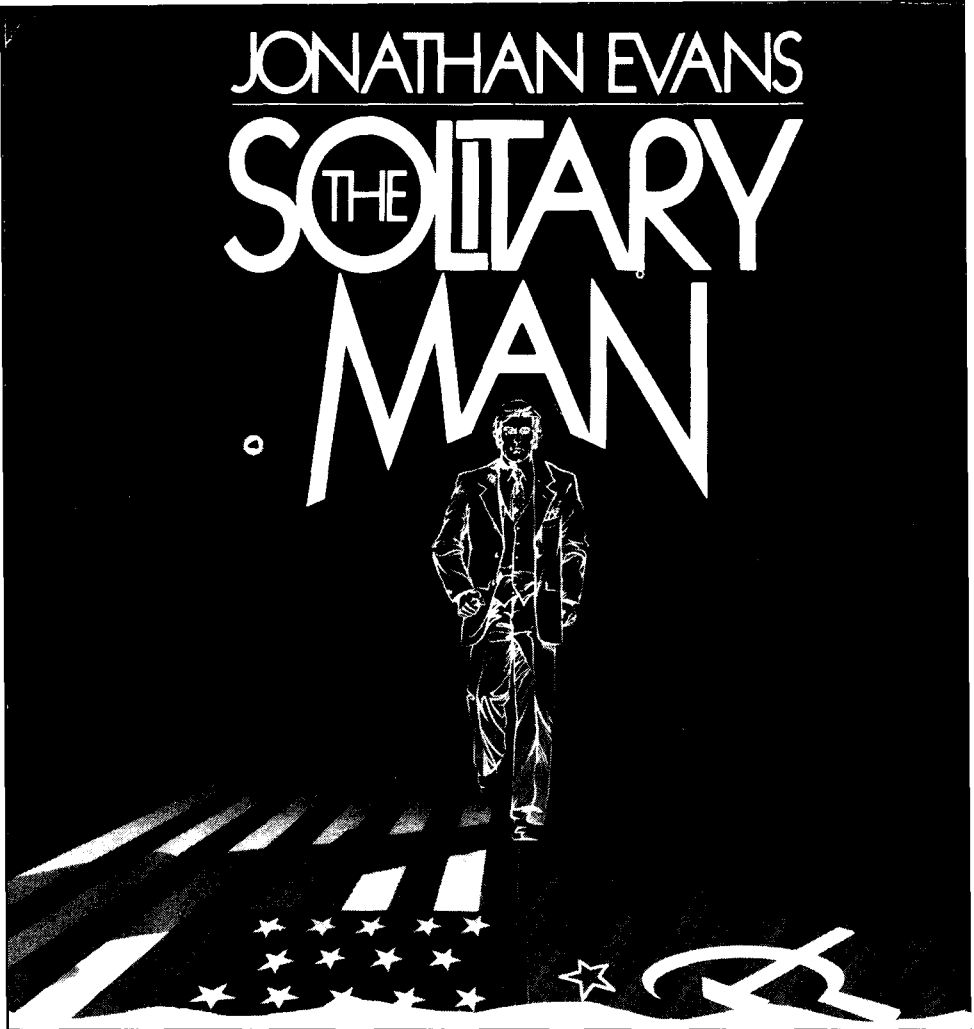
THE SOLITARY MAN



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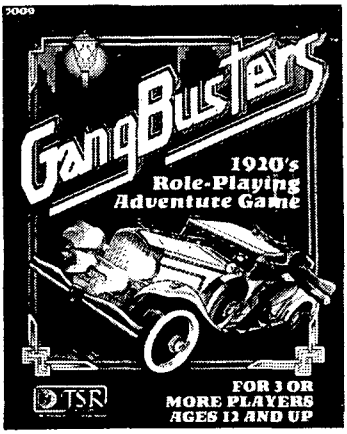

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

December 1931. A murder in a Cape Cod lighthouse with no one inside but the victim.

"We don't have to believe in ghosts," Dr. Sam said. "There's a logical explanation. There has to be . . ."

THE PROBLEM OF SANTA'S LIGHTHOUSE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"You say you'd like a Christmas story this time?" old Dr. Sam Hawthorne said as he poured the drinks into fine crystal wineglasses. "Well, the holidays are approaching, and as it happens I've got an adventure from December of 1931 that fills the bill nicely. It didn't happen in Northmont, but along the coast, over toward Cape Cod . . ."

I'd decided to take a few days off (Dr. Sam continued), and took a drive by myself along the coast. It was something of a treat for me, since vacations are rare for a country doctor. But now that the Pilgrim Memorial Hospital had opened in Northmont, some of the pressure was off. If people couldn't reach me in an emergency, the hospital was there to minister to their ills.

So off I went in my Stutz Torpedo, promising my nurse April I'd telephone her in a few days to make certain everything was under control. It was the first week in December, but winter hadn't yet set in along the New England coast. There was no snow, and temperatures were in the forties. Along with every other part of the country, the area had been hard hit by the Depression, but once I'd passed

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through the old mill towns and headed north along the coast I saw less poverty.

Not far from Plymouth, a sign nailed to a tree caught my attention. *Visit Santa's Lighthouse!* it read, and although such commercial ventures to attract children are commonplace today, they were still a bit unusual in 1931. I couldn't imagine a lighthouse whose sole function was to entertain tots in the weeks before Christmas. But then I noticed that the word *Santa's* had been tacked on over the original name. It was enough to make me curious, so I turned down the road to the shore.

And there it was, sure enough: a gleaming white structure that rose from the rocky shoreline and proclaimed across its base, in foot-high wooden letters, that it was indeed Santa's Lighthouse. I parked my car next to two others and walked up the path to where a bright-faced girl of college age was selling admissions for twenty-five cents. She was wearing bright Christmasy red.

"How many?" she asked, peering down the path as if expecting me to be followed by a wife and children.

"Just one." I took a quarter from my pocket.

"We have a special family rate of fifty cents."

"No, I'm alone." I pointed up at the sign. "What's the name of this place the rest of the year?"

"You noticed we changed the sign," she said with a grin. "It's really Satan's Lighthouse, but there's nothing very Christmas-sounding about that. So we took the 'n' off the end of Satan and moved it to the middle."

I had to chuckle at the idea. "Has it helped business?"

"A little. But with this Depression and gasoline twenty-five cents a gallon, we don't get many families willing to drive here from Boston or Providence."

A bulging, padded Santa Claus appeared at the door just then, mumbling through his beard, "Lisa, you have to do something about those kids. They're pulling the beard and kicking me!"

She sighed and turned her attention to the Santa. "Harry, you've got to show a little patience—you can't expect me to go running in to rescue you every time they give you any trouble."

I said, "He's not so good at this Santa Claus business."

"He's much better as the pirate ghost," she agreed.

"The pirate ghost is a feature of Satan's Lighthouse?"

She gave a quick nod and offered her hand. "I'm Lisa Quay. That's

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my brother, Harry. There's a legend that goes with this place—I guess it's why our father bought it."

"Buried treasure."

"How'd you guess? Pirates are supposed to have put up a false light here to lure ships onto the rocks and loot them, just as they once did off the coast of Cornwall. That's why it was called Satan's Lighthouse. When a real lighthouse was built years later, the local people called it by the same name. But of course there aren't pirates any more—except when my brother puts on his costume."

I introduced myself and she told me more about the region. She was an open, unassuming young woman who seemed more than capable of taking care of herself—and her brother, from what I'd seen. "Is your father here, too?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Daddy's in prison."

"Oh?"

"He was convicted of some sort of fraud last year. I never fully understood it, and I don't believe he was guilty, but he refused to defend himself. He has another year to serve before he's eligible for parole."

"So you and your brother are keeping this place going in his absence."

"That's about it. Now you know my life story, Dr. Hawthorne."

"Call me Sam. I'm not that much older than you."

Four unruly children came out of the lighthouse, shepherded by a frustrated Santa Claus. I watched while they piled into a waiting car and drove off with their parents. "Anyone else inside now?" Lisa asked her brother.

"No, it's empty."

"You're not making any money by my standing here," I decided, plunking down the quarter I was still holding. "I'll have a ticket."

"Come on," Harry Quay said. "I'll show you through."

The lighthouse was a slender whitewashed structure with rectangular sides that tapered toward the top, where a railing and walkway surrounded the light itself. I followed Quay up the iron staircase that spiraled through the center of the structure. The padded Santa suit didn't slow him down and he made the first landing well ahead of me. I was short of breath and welcomed the pause when he led me to a room that had been converted into a Santa's workshop.

"We bring the kids up here and give them inexpensive little toys," he explained. "Then we go the rest of the way up to the light."

"What's the room used for the rest of the year?"

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"Originally it was the sleeping quarters for the lighthouse crew—generally a keeper and his wife. Of course, Lisa and I don't live here ourselves. We use the room for the pirate's den when it's not Christmas."

I glanced at the spiral staircase, anxious to get the rest of the climbing behind me. "Let's see the top."

We went up another dozen feet to the next level, where a rolltop desk and wooden filing cabinet had been outfitted with signs indicating it was Santa's office. The nautical charts of Cape Cod Bay on the walls were festooned with streamers proclaiming a landing area for Santa's reindeer-powered sleigh. There were powerful binoculars and a telescope for observing passing ships, and a two-way radio for receiving weather reports or S.O.S. messages.

"I have to watch the kids every minute up here," Harry Quay said. "Some of this equipment is valuable."

"I'm surprised it's still here if the lighthouse is no longer in use."

"My father kept them for some reason. He used to sit up here at night sometimes. It was a hobby of his, I suppose. That's why he bought the place."

I gestured toward the ceiling of the little office. "Does the light up above still operate?"

"I doubt it. I haven't tried it myself."

We climbed the rest of the way to the circular outside walkway that went around the light itself. A metal railing allowed me a handhold, but one could easily slip beneath it and fall to the ground. "You don't bring the kids up here, do you?"

"One at a time, with me holding their hand. I'm very careful."

I had to admit it was a magnificent view. On the bay side the land fell away rapidly to the water's edge, and as far as I could see the chill waters were casting up rippling whitecaps before the stiff ocean breeze. The curve of Cape Cod itself was clearly visible from this high up, and I could even make out the opposite shoreline some twenty miles across the bay.

But at this time of the year night came early and the sun was already low in the western sky. "I'd better get going if I want to reach Boston tonight," I said.

"Why go that far? There are plenty of places to stay around Plymouth."

We went back downstairs and met Lisa at the workshop level. "Did you enjoy the view? Isn't it spectacular?"

"It certainly is," I agreed. "You should double your prices."

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"No one comes as it is," she replied with a touch of sadness.

"If the light still works, turn it on! Bring in some customers in the early evening."

"Oh, the coast guard would never allow that." She bustled about the workroom, picking up a few candy wrappers dropped by the children, retrieving a reel of fishing line and a set of jacks from one corner. "You find the darnedest things at the end of the day."

"Your brother says there are some places I could stay in the Plymouth area."

"Sure. The Plymouth Rock is a nice old place, and the rooms are clean." She turned to her brother. "Let's close up for the night."

"I'd better make sure everything's shut upstairs," Harry said.

"I'll go with you."

I started down the spiral staircase to the ground floor. I waited a few minutes, thinking they'd be following soon, but I became restless. The lighthouse had been a pleasant diversion, but I was anxious to move on.

"Wait a minute!" Lisa Quay called out as I started down the path to my car. She was at one of the middle windows, and I paused while she came down to meet me.

"I didn't mean to leave without saying goodbye," I told her, "but it's getting dark and I should be on my way."

"At least wait for Harry. He's taking off his Santa Claus suit. He'll be down in a minute."

I strolled back with her while she closed up the foldaway ticket booth and stowed it inside the lighthouse doorway. "If this weather holds out, you should get some crowds before Christmas."

"I hope so," she said. "Those four kids you saw were the only customers we had all afternoon."

"Maybe you could offer a special group-rate for—"

"What's that?" she asked suddenly, hurrying back outside. "Harry?" she called out, looking up. "Is that you?"

There was some sort of noise from above us and then Lisa Quay screamed. I looked up in time to see a figure falling from the circular walkway at the top of the lighthouse. I sprang aside, pulling her with me, as Harry Quay's body hit the ground where we'd been standing.

Lisa turned away screaming, her hands covering her face. I hurried over to her brother, my mind racing through the possibilities of getting fast help if he was still alive.

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Then I saw the handle of the dagger protruding from between his ribs and I knew that help was useless.

"I don't believe in ghosts," she said quite rationally as we waited for the police to arrive. I'd used the lighthouse radio to call the coast guard, who promised to contact the state police for us. While I was inside, I'd looked in both rooms and even inside a little storeroom, but the lighthouse was empty. There was nothing on the walkway to indicate anyone else had been there, nothing on the spiral staircase to point to an unseen visitor.

"We don't have to believe in ghosts," I told her. "There's a logical explanation. There has to be. Have you ever seen that dagger before?"

"Yes. It's part of his pirate costume. The storeroom—"

"I checked the storeroom. I saw the costume hanging there. No one was hiding."

"Well, I don't believe in ghosts," she said again.

"The police will be here soon."

She fastened her hand on my arm. "You won't leave, will you? You won't leave before they come?"

"Of course not." I'd moved her away from her brother's body, so she'd be spared the sight while we waited for the police. I could see she was close to hysteria and might need my professional services at any moment.

"Without your testimony they might try to say I killed him," she said. "Even though I had no reason to."

"I'm sure they wouldn't say that," I tried to assure her.

"But no one else is here! Don't you see how it looks?"

"You were down on the ground with me when he was stabbed. I'll testify to that."

"Suppose I rigged up some sort of device to throw the knife at him when he stepped out onto the walkway."

I shook my head. "I was up there with him shortly before he was killed. And I went up there again a few moments ago. There was no device, and nothing left over from one. There was nothing at all on that walkway."

"Then what killed him? Who killed him?"

Before I could respond, we saw the headlights of two police cars and an ambulance cutting through the early darkness. I had plenty of time to tell my story then, and Lisa told hers. They walked around with their flashlights, examining the body, asking questions, going

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through the motions. But it was clear that they didn't want to deal with a pirate ghost, much less any sort of impossible crime. I fondly wished for old Sheriff Lens back in Northmont. At least he could keep an open mind about such things.

"Did your brother have any enemies?" one officer asked Lisa.

"No, none at all. I can't imagine anyone wishing him harm."

"Can you tell me why he's wearing this false beard?"

"He'd been playing Santa Claus for the children. He was changing out of his costume when it happened."

The officer, a burly man named Springer, turned to me next. "Dr. Hawthorne?"

"That's correct."

"You say you were just passing through, not bound for any particular place?"

"Just a little vacation," I explained. "I practice in Northmont, near the Connecticut state line. The sign attracted me, and I stopped for an hour or so."

"Ever know the deceased or his sister before?"

"No."

He sighed and glanced at his pocket watch. Perhaps he hadn't had supper yet. "Well, if both of you are telling the truth, it looks like an accident to me. Somehow he slipped and fell on the knife up there, and then toppled off the walkway. Or else he killed himself."

"That couldn't—" Lisa started to say, but I nudged her into silence. The officer seemed not to notice.

As the body was being taken away, she said, "I'll have to notify Father."

"How do you go about that? Where's his prison?"

"Near Boston. I'll phone a message tonight and go there tomorrow to see him."

I made a decision. "I'd like to go with you."

"What for?"

"I've had a little experience in solving crimes like this. I may be able to help you."

"But there are no suspects! Where would you begin?"

"With your father," I said.

I slept surprisingly well in my room at the Plymouth Rock, and awoke refreshed. After a quick breakfast, I picked up Lisa at the small house in town she'd shared with her brother. "The police called

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this morning," she said. "They want us both to come in and make statements about what happened."

"We'll do it this afternoon," I decided. "Let's see your father first."

"What do you hope to learn from him?"

"The reason why he's in prison, among other things. You seem reluctant to talk about it."

"I'm not reluctant at all!" she bristled. "Until now I didn't really feel it was any of your business. Daddy brought us up after Mother died. What happened to him was a terrible thing. He's in prison for a crime he didn't commit."

"You said something about a fraud."

"I'll let him tell you about it."

Because of his son's death, we were both allowed to see Ronald Quay together. He was a thin man, who looked as if he might have aged overnight. His pale complexion had already taken on the look of endless incarceration, even though Lisa said he'd been locked up for only a year. She cried when he was led into the room, and the guard stood by awkwardly as they embraced.

"This is Dr. Sam Hawthorne," she told her father. "He was at the lighthouse with us when it happened."

He wanted details and I told him everything I knew. He sat across the table, merely shaking his head.

"I've done a little amateur detective work back in Northmont," I told him. "I thought I might be able to help out here."

"How?"

"By asking the right questions." I paused, sizing up the man almost as I would diagnose a patient's illness, and then I said, "You're in prison for committing a crime, and now the crime of murder has apparently been committed against your son. I wonder if there could be a relationship between those two crimes."

"I don't—" He shook his head.

"I know it seems impossible that anyone could have killed Harry, but if someone did they had to have a motive."

"He didn't have an enemy in the world," Lisa insisted.

"Perhaps he was killed not for what he was like but for what he was doing," I suggested.

"You mean playing Santa Claus?"

"You said he played a pirate, too. And he was struck down with a pirate's dagger."

"Who could possibly—?"

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I interrupted her with another question for her father. "Were you engaged in any sort of illegal activity at the lighthouse?"

"Certainly not," he answered without hesitation. "I've maintained my innocence of these charges from the beginning."

"Then the fraud charges somehow involved the lighthouse?"

"Only in the most general way," Lisa replied. "At one point we tried to set up a corporation and sell shares of stock. A Boston man went to the police and accused my father of fraud because Daddy claimed he had a million dollars to build an amusement park."

"Did you ever claim that?" I asked him.

"No! Harry suggested once that we put in one of those miniature golf courses that are all the rage, but I was against even that. Certainly no one ever mentioned a million dollars."

"They must have had evidence of fraud."

He looked at his hands. "A stock prospectus we had printed, just for test purposes. It wasn't supposed to get out. Lisa can tell you we don't even own much land around the lighthouse— We couldn't have built an amusement park there even if we'd wanted to."

Lisa sighed. "That's exactly the argument the prosecutor used to convict you, Daddy."

I was aware that he'd neatly avoided the main thrust of my question by bringing up the fraud conviction. "Forget the fraud charges for the moment, Mr. Quay. What about other activities at the lighthouse?"

"I don't know what you mean," he said, but his eyes shifted away.

"The two-way radio. The powerful binoculars. The telescope. They were used to locate and contact ships offshore, weren't they?"

"Why would I—?" he began, then changed his mind. "All right. You seem to know a great deal."

"What were they landing at the lighthouse? Illegal whiskey from Canada, I imagine."

Lisa's eyes widened. "Daddy!"

"I needed money from somewhere, Lisa. Using that lighthouse for pirates and Santa Clauses was a losing proposition from the beginning."

"You told Dr. Hawthorne there'd been no illegal activity there."

"Prohibition is an unjust and unpopular law. I don't consider that I acted illegally in helping to circumvent it."

"What happened after you went to prison?" I asked. "Did Harry continue the bootlegging activities?"

"He knew nothing about it," Quay insisted.

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"And yet the radio and telescope are still in place, a year later."

"He was sentimental about moving them," Lisa explained. "He wanted everything just as it was for when Daddy came back."

"You must have dealt with someone on this bootlegging operation, Mr. Quay. Couldn't that man have contacted Harry and struck a deal with him after your imprisonment?"

Ronald Quay was silent for a moment, considering the possibility. "I suppose so," he admitted at last. "That would be like him. And it would be like Harry to accept the deal without telling anyone."

"I need the name, Mr. Quay."

"I—"

"The name of the man you dealt with. The name of the person who might have contacted your son to continue with the setup. Because that might be the name of his murderer."

"Paul Lane," he said at last. "That's the name you want." The words had been an effort for him to speak.

"Who is he? Where can we find him?"

"He owns some seafood restaurants along the coast. I can give you an address in Boston."

As we parked my Stutz Torpedo along the Boston docks a few hours later, Lisa said, "Sam, how come you're not married?"

"I've never met the right woman at the right time, I guess."

"I want to ask you something—a very great favor."

"What is it?"

"Could you stay here with me until after Harry's funeral? I don't think I could get through it alone."

"When—?"

"Day after tomorrow. You could leave by noon if you wanted to. They'll let Daddy come down from prison with a guard, and there'll be some aunts and uncles. That's all. We're not a big family."

"Let me think about it. Maybe I can."

Lane's Lobsters was a seafood restaurant that also sold live lobsters for boiling at home. A grey-haired man behind the lobster tank told us Paul Lane's office was upstairs. We climbed the rickety steps to the second floor and found him sitting behind a cluttered desk. He puffed on a fat cigar that gave him the look of a minor politician.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, removing the cigar from his mouth.

"We're interested in some lobsters," I said.

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"The retail business is downstairs. I just handle wholesale up here." He gestured toward an open ice-chest full of dead lobsters.

"That's what we want—wholesale."

He squinted at Lisa. "Don't I know you?"

"You may know my brother. Harry Quay."

Paul Lane was no good at hiding his reaction. After the first shock of surprise he tried to cover it with a denial, but I pressed on. "You run a bootlegging operation, Lane, and you involved her father and brother in it."

"Go to hell! Get outa here!"

"We want to talk. Somebody killed her brother last evening."

"I read the papers. They say it was an accident."

"I was there. I call it murder."

Paul Lane's lip twisted in a sneer. "Is that so? If you two were alone with him, then you must have killed him."

I leaned on the desk between us. "We didn't come here to play games, Mr. Lane. I think you approached Harry after his father went to prison on that fraud rap. You wanted to continue bringing your Canadian whiskey ashore at Satan's Lighthouse, and you needed Harry's cooperation. Isn't that right?"

He got up from his desk and deliberately closed the lid on the ice-chest. "I don't know what you're talking about, mister."

As a lobsterman or a bootlegger, he might have been pretty good, but just then he was being a bit too obvious. When he sat down again I lifted the lid and picked up one of the cold lobsters.

"What in hell are you doing?" he bellowed, coming out of his chair.

I turned the lobster over. Its insides had been hollowed out to make room for a slim bottle of whiskey. "Neat," I said. "I'll bet that's a popular take-out item at your restaurants."

Before I realized what was happening, his fist caught me on the side of the head. I stumbled back against the ice-chest as Lisa screamed. Two tough-looking seamen barged in, attracted by the noise. "Get them!" Lane ordered. "Both of them!"

I was still clutching the dead lobster and I shoved it into the nearest man's face. "Run!" I shouted to Lisa. Lane was out from behind his desk, trying to stop her, when I shoved him aside and followed her out the door. Then all three of them were after us and I felt one beefy hand grab at my shoulder. We made it halfway down the stairs before they caught us, and I tripped and stumbled the rest of the way to the ground floor, landing hard on my chest.

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I looked up and saw one of the men take out a knife. Then I saw someone from the restaurant grab his wrist.

I recognized Springer, the state police officer who had questioned us. "Having a little trouble here, Dr. Hawthorne?" he asked.

I'd cracked a rib falling down the stairs, and while it was being taped up Springer explained that he'd gone to the prison to question Ronald Quay, arriving just as we were leaving. "You seemed in such a hurry I decided to follow along. You led me here."

The Boston police and agents of the Prohibition Bureau had taken over Paul Lane's operation, seizing hundreds of barrels of good Canadian whiskey. My last glimpse of Lane was when a cop led him away in handcuffs. "Did he kill my brother?" Lisa asked.

"Not personally, but he probably ordered it done. I can't name the actual killer, but I can give you a description of him and tell you how I think the murder was committed."

"I hope you're not going to say somebody threw the knife from the rocks all the way to the top of that lighthouse," Springer said.

"No," I agreed. "It's much too tall for that. And that pirate dagger is too unbalanced to have been fired from a crossbow or anything similar. The killer was right there with Harry when he died."

"But that's impossible!" Lisa insisted.

"No, it isn't. There was one place in that lighthouse we never searched, one place where the killer could have been hidden—the rolltop desk in the office on the top floor."

"But that's absurd!" Lisa said. "It's hardly big enough for a child!"

"Exactly—a child. Or someone dressed as a child. Remember that carload of children that arrived just before me? Didn't you think it odd the parents remained in the car—especially since the lighthouse offered a family rate? Four children came out, but I'm willing to bet that five children went in."

Lisa's eyes widened. "My lord, I think you're right!"

"One stayed behind, hidden in that rolltop desk. And when Harry came back upstairs to close up, he did his job. He was a hit man hired by Paul Lane, who'd had a falling-out with your brother over the bootlegging business. I think we'll find enough evidence in Lane's records to verify that."

Springer was frowning. "You're telling us a child was the hit man?"

"Or someone dressed as a child," I said. "Someone small—maybe a midget."

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"A midget!"

"What better hit man to kill a Santa Claus than a midget dressed as a small child? Five children entered the lighthouse but only four came out. No one thought of the missing child. The supposed parents drove away, leaving a hidden killer awaiting his opportunity."

"All right," Springer said with a nod. "If Lane has a midget on his payroll it should be easy enough to discover." He started out and then paused at the door with a slight smile. "I checked up on you. Sheriff Lens back in Northmont says you're a pretty fair detective."

When he had gone, Lisa Quay said simply, "Thank you. It won't bring him back, but at least I know what happened."

Two days later I was at Lisa Quay's side as her brother was buried beneath the barren December trees of the Plymouth cemetery. As we were walking to the car, Springer intercepted us. "I thought you'd like to know that we have a line on a very short man who worked as a waiter last year in Paul Lane's New Bedford lobster house. We're trying to locate him now."

"Good luck," I said. "I'm heading home today."

My car was back at the funeral parlor and I said goodbye to Lisa Quay there. "Thanks again," she said. "For everything, Sam."

I'd been driving about an hour when I saw the boy fishing off a bridge over a narrow creek. My first thought was that December wasn't likely to be a good fishing month.

My second thought was that I'd made a terrible mistake.

I pulled the car off the road and sat for a long time staring at nothing at all. Finally I started the motor and made a U-turn, heading back the way I had come.

It was late afternoon when Santa's Lighthouse came into view, much as it had been that first day I saw the place. Lisa's car was parked nearby, but no others. The lighthouse was still closed to visitors. I pulled in next to her car and got out, walking up the path to the doorway. She must have heard the car and seen me from the window, because she opened the door with a smile.

"You've come back, Sam."

"Just for a little bit," I told her. "Can we talk?"

"About what?" She was flirting, seductive.

"About Harry's murder."

Her face changed. "Have they found the midget?"

I shook my head. "They'll never find the midget because there never was one. I made a mistake."

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"What are you talking about?"

"We kept saying there were no suspects, but of course there always was one suspect. Not the least likely person but the most likely one. You killed your brother, Lisa."

"You're insane!" she flared, trying to close the door on me. I easily blocked it with my foot, and after a moment she relaxed and I stepped inside.

"The more I thought about it, the more impossible the midget hit man became. Those kids were raising a fuss, pulling Santa's beard and otherwise calling attention to themselves. That's hardly the sort of thing our killer would have allowed. The success of his scheme as I imagined it depended upon their group being unnoticed and uncounted." Lisa stood with her arms folded, pretending to humor me.

"Then, too, there was the matter of the murder weapon. A hit man would certainly bring his own weapon, not rely on finding a pirate dagger in a storeroom.

"Third point: how did the killer lure Harry out onto that walkway, especially when he was still removing his costume and had the beard on?"

"He might have been stabbed in the office below," Lisa said, her voice a mere whisper.

I shook my head. "No midget could have carried Harry's body up that ladder. He went up there by himself, with his murderer, and with the fake beard still on, because it was someone he trusted."

"You're forgetting I was with you when he was killed."

"Correction—you were with me when his body fell from the walkway. An hour ago on the road I passed a boy fishing off a bridge. And I remembered you picking up a reel of fishing line in the workroom. It hadn't been left by a child at all. You simply needed it for your scheme. You went back upstairs, called your brother up to the walkway on some pretext, stabbed him, and left his body right at the edge where it could easily be slid beneath the railing. You tied one end of the fishing line to his body and dropped the other end over the side of the lighthouse to the ground. It was nearly dark at the time, and I didn't see it when I went out. You called me back because you needed me for your alibi. I suppose you'd been waiting for days for the right person to happen along just at dusk. You pulled on the line and Harry's body rolled off the catwalk, nearly hitting us as it fell to the ground."

"If that's true, what happened to the fishing line?"

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"I missed it in the dim light when I examined the body. Then when I went upstairs to radio for help, you simply untied it from the body and hid it away."

"Why would I kill my own brother?"

"Because you discovered he was responsible for sending your father to prison. It was Harry who printed that phony stock prospectus and tried to defraud investors with dreams of an amusement park. Your father was covering up for him. When you learned about that, and learned that Harry was involved in the bootlegging scheme with Paul Lane, it was more than you could bear."

The fight had gone out of her. "At first I couldn't believe the things he'd done—letting Daddy go to prison for his crime! And then this thing with Lane! I—"

"How did it happen?" I asked quietly.

Her voice was somber. "I waited a week for someone like you to come by—someone alone. Then I called him up there and gave him one last chance. I told him he had to confess to the police and get Daddy out of prison or I'd kill him. He laughed and made a grab for the dagger and I stabbed him. I used the fishing line just like you said. It was strong but thin, and almost invisible in the fading light." She looked away. "I thought I was lucky you came along, but I guess luck doesn't run in the family."

"You have to tell Springer," I said. "He's looking for that waiter. If you let an innocent man go to prison, you'd be as wrong as your brother was."

"All that planning," she said. "For nothing."

"That was how it ended," Dr. Sam concluded. "I wasn't particularly proud of my part in the affair, and I never told the folks back in Northmont about it. When my nurse April asked about the tape on my ribs I told her I'd fallen down. But by the time Christmas came we had snow, and it was a merry holiday for all of us. Then early the following year came that business at the cemetery—which *didn't* involve a ghost. But that's for next time."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

The Appaloosa's foreparts were white as a perfect cloud, its loin and shank spotted with round black markings. She had fattened out from their inactive life in the upper forest. Tree rode her on a regular basis only twice a month, when he came down to the settlement for supplies. But she was a happy animal—she loved the man who had captured her, and Tree guessed that if he ever had to do any hard riding, she would run her heart out for him.

Another superb story from Clark Howard, author of "Horn Man," "Old Soldiers," "Custer's Ghost," "New Orleans Getaway," and last year's award-winning "All the Heroes Are Dead"...

WILD THINGS

by CLARK HOWARD

Tree O'Hara lay prone on the ground and peered down at a little crossroads settlement through twelve-power binoculars. He was in a stand of tall pines six hundred yards or so up the mountain. The settlement, which did not even have a name, consisted of a Conoco gas station, a general store, and a roadhouse restaurant, each occupying a corner where the two mountain highways intersected. The fourth corner was unimproved and stood vacant except for a roadsign which read BUTTE 112.

It was Sunday afternoon and both the Conoco station and the general store were closed. The roadhouse restaurant was open but there was only one car parked in front of it: a five-year-old Cadillac with California plates.

Tree lowered the binoculars and got to his feet. He was a tall, once lean man, now beginning to flesh out with his age approaching forty;

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but still muscular, still quick. His most striking feature was his eyes—they were cold, and so black and flat they could have passed as sightless. He wore denim jeans and a Levi jacket over a faded work shirt; on his feet were lace-up lumberjack boots.

Leaving the edge of the pines, Tree walked briskly another hundred yards into the forest where he had left his horse. It was an Appaloosa, the horse—its foreparts white as a perfect cloud, its loin and shank spotted with round black markings. A mare, she stood just under fifteen hands high. When Tree had caught her, wild, in the Nez Perce National Forest four years earlier, she had been a fast and trim thousand or so pounds. Now he reckoned she weighed around twelve hundred. She had fattened out from their inactive life in the upper forest. Tree rode her on a regular basis only twice a month, when he came down to the settlement for supplies. But she was a happy animal—she loved the man who had captured her, and Tree guessed that if he ever had to do any hard riding, she would run her heart out for him.

The mare snorted and dug at the ground with one hoof as Tree approached. "Easy, Elk," he said quietly. Elk City, west of the Bitterroot Range, was where he had roped her, so he had named her Elk. He rubbed her throat now to calm her, then stepped back to the saddle and put his binoculars in a case hanging from the horn. From a blanketroll behind the saddle he removed a pair of telephone-pole climbers and buckled them to the inside of his legs. From one saddlebag, he took a telephone lineman's intercept set—a receiver with a dial built into it and two magnesium clips for tapping into a wire—and hooked it onto his belt. "Keep still," he said to Elk, rubbing her throat again.

Walking fifty feet to a string of telephone poles that went up and over the mountain, Tree put on gloves and climbed one of them to its cross-beam. He hooked one arm around the beam to steady himself. With his free hand he laid the intercept set on the beam, attached the magnesium clips to one of the telephone wires, and got a dial tone in the receiver. He dialed the number of the restaurant at the crossroads. John Grey Sky, the Shoshone owner, answered.

"John," said Tree without preliminary, "who's the Caddy belong to?"

"Oh, Tree, it's you. The Caddy? Nobody, man. A couple of sharpies and some bimbo passing through. They're slopping down beer and arguing about which route to take to Chicago."

"What do they look like?" Tree asked. "The men, I mean."

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"Losers," said John. "Small-timers. Punks."

"You're sure? They're not just pulling an act?"

"Listen, brother, I know rabble when I see it," John assured him. "You're safe. Come on down. I got your supplies."

"Okay," Tree said. He had hesitated just a beat before answering. He hoped John Grey Sky had not noticed. He and John had been friends for twenty-five years, since attending Caribou Indian School together as young boys. It would never do to insult a friend of such long standing by doubting his judgment. If Grey Sky said he would be safe, Tree had to assume he would be. All the same, when he got back to Elk and put his equipment away, he took a loaded forty-five automatic from the saddlebag, jacked a round into the chamber, thumbed the safety on, and stuck it in his waistband under the Levi jacket where it could not be seen.

Tree led the Appaloosa to the edge of the pines and tied her reins to a buffalobur shrub. The bush had just enough prickly spines on it to discourage Elk from nibbling the reins untied and following him, as she liked to do. "Be a good girl," he said, scratching her ears. "I'll bring you an apple."

Tree made his way down the slope and came onto the highway around the bend from the roadhouse. He approached the crossroads from behind the closed Conoco station, aware with every step of the gun in his waistband. From the side of the station he studied the car with the California plates. The tires were fairly worn, there was some rust on the chrome, and a small dent in the right rear fender had been left unrepaired. It looked like a loser's car, all right, just as Grey Sky had said. All the same, Tree was glad he had the gun.

Hurrying across to the rear of the roadhouse, Tree slipped through the open back door into the kitchen. John Grey Sky was scraping down his fry grill. "Hey, bro," he said.

"Hey, John." Tree's eyes swept the room, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Through the service window he could hear the voices of Grey Sky's three customers.

"Your supplies are there on the meat table," Grey Sky said.

Tree stepped over to a butcher block and examined the contents of a burlap bag: cheese, coffee, tins of meat, dry cereal, powdered milk, beef jerky, magazines, a dozen fresh apples for Elk. "You get my animal food?" he asked the roadhouse owner.

"Under the table."

Tree pulled out a twenty-pound sack of processed dry animal food pellets. Similar to the food sold commercially to feed dogs and cats,

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it differed in that it contained flavors attractive to wild as opposed to domestic animals.

"You must be feeding half the wild things on that mountain," Grey Sky commented. "They're going to have to learn to scavenge all over again after you're gone."

Tree felt himself tense. "After I'm gone where?"

John Grey Sky shrugged. "Wherever."

Tree stared at his friend's back. Grey Sky could get a lot of money for betraying Tree O'Hara. Tree wondered if his friend was ever tempted.

The voices from the front of the restaurant grew louder. "You're getting a free lift to Chicago," a man's voice said. "Least you could do is be a little more friendly."

"Drop dead," a woman's throaty voice replied. There was a loud cracking noise then—the unmistakable sound of a face being slapped.

Frowning at each other, Tree and Grey Sky walked out from the kitchen. One of the men was standing, half bent over the table. The woman, seated, was staring up at him defiantly, one side of her face turning an angry red.

"You kick dogs, too?" she asked.

He hit her again, backhanded, on the other side of her face.

"Hey, man, no rough stuff in here!" Grey Sky said.

The man raised his hand again.

"Don't do it," Tree said. His voice, like his eyes, was flat and hard. It was clearly an order.

The man at the table turned around, one hand reaching for an empty beer bottle. "Who the hell are you?"

"Don't matter who I am," Tree said. He pulled back one side of his Levi jacket to expose the gun. "Don't hit her again."

"You gonna kill me if I do?" the man challenged with a sneer.

"No, just cripple you," Tree replied matter-of-factly. "I'll put one in your left instep. Blow your foot all to pieces."

The other man at the table intervened. "Hold it, chief," he said with a forced smile. "We don't want no hassle." He took the bottle from his friend's hand and put it down. "Come on, Lou, forget it. It's their patch." Picking up the check Grey Sky had given them, he looked at it and put some money on the table. "You coming?" he asked the woman.

"Not on your life," she said. Both sides of her face were now violently red.

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"Please yourself. Come on, Lou."

The two men started to leave.

"Wait a minute, I've got a suitcase in that car!" the woman said urgently.

"Come on," Tree said. He went outside and stood with her while Lou opened the trunk and set her suitcase on the ground. Then the two men got in the Caddy and drove off.

The woman picked up her suitcase and followed Tree back inside. "Thanks," she said.

"Forget it," Tree told her. He studied her for a moment. She was, he guessed, an old twenty-five. There was no telling what her true hair color was—bottle blonde with black roots was what he could see. Too much makeup. A well used but still good body. A bimbo, he thought. Like Grey Sky had said. The kind who'd take a free ride with two losers in a five-year-old Caddy.

"What time's the next bus through here?" she asked, uncomfortable under Tree's scrutiny.

"Friday," said Grey Sky.

"*Friday!* This is only Sunday. Are you kidding me?"

"I never kid about anything as serious as bus service. Just once a week the bus comes over the mountain. Rest of the time it follows the Interstate around the mountain." Grey Sky looked over at his friend. Tree was staring at him, the realization having just dawned on him that the roadhouse owner was right. "Didn't think about that, did you, Galahad?" asked Grey Sky.

"Where the hell am I going to stay until Friday?" the woman asked in a half whine. "I don't have money for a motel."

"That works out just fine," Grey Sky said, "'cause there's no motel anyway."

"Well, what am I gonna do!" she shrieked.

Tree looked at his friend. Grey Sky held both hands up, palms out.

"Not me, bro. I got my wife, four kids, my wife's mother, my unemployed brother-in-law and *his* wife and two kids—all in a two-bedroom, one-bath house. Sorry."

"Could you let her sleep here, put a cot in the kitchen—?"

Grey Sky shook his head. "My insurance don't allow overnight occupation of the premises. If she accidentally burned the place down, I couldn't collect a nickel. You're going to have to handle this good deed yourself, Galahad."

Tree glared at his friend. Grey Sky was obviously enjoying himself.

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He could hear the woman panting as she trudged along behind him, lugging her suitcase with both hands. "How—much farther—is it?" she gasped.

"Not far." Carrying the burlap bag of supplies on one shoulder, the sack of animal food on the other, Tree deliberately kept his pace slow to allow her to keep up with him. But when he saw that she was falling too far behind anyway, he stopped to let her rest.

"How come you live up in the mountains anyway?" she demanded. "You anti-social? Don't you like people?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't," he said, "very much."

Now it was her turn to study him. She was not sure whether she liked what she saw. Those eyes of his didn't seem to have even a degree of warmth in them. "What'd that fellow down there say your name was? Galahad?"

"He was just trying to be funny. My name's Tree O'Hara."

"Tree? How'd you get a name like that?"

"My mother's family name. She was Indian. I'm one-quarter Minnetonka."

"Oh. Well, my name's Violet. I was named after a flower. You can call me Vi."

He nodded. "Come on," he said, "let's go on."

After one more rest stop, they came to the edge of the pines where Elk waited. As they approached, the mare snorted and pawed the ground edgily. "She smells you," Tree said. "She knows you're a woman. She's jealous. —Come on—easy, baby," he said to Elk, putting an arm under her neck.

"Sure is a funny-looking horse," Vi said. "Looks like the front of one and the back of another, stuck together."

Tree threw her an irritated glance. "This happens to be an Appaloosa. It's one of the most intelligent breeds of horse in the world, as well as one of the fastest. This horse has more stamina and endurance than any other breed you can name. It is the best stock horse, the best show horse—"

"All's I said was it was funny-looking," she interrupted. "I'm sorry, but that's my opinion. Personally, I like Palaminos. Like Trigger, you know?"

Tree turned away in disgust. *Trigger!* A Hollywood horse. Great spirits!

Tree lashed the two sacks one on top of each other just behind the blanketroll, then helped Vi into the saddle. She had to hike her skirt far up on her thighs in order to straddle the horse's back, but it

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didn't seem to bother her. Tree noticed that her legs were well rounded, fleshy—in fact, all of her was well rounded and fleshy; she wasn't skinny anywhere, a fact that Tree approved of. He didn't care for overly slim women—they always looked too fragile, like stick-wood. Elk was of a different mind, however; the mare did not like the woman at all, and showed it by shuffling around skittishly and snorting loudly through flared nostrils. Tree finally had to cut up an apple and feed it to her so they could be on their way.

The trip to the cabin took another two hours, Tree leading the horse and rider while carrying Vi's suitcase in his free hand. He didn't mind the walk—in fact, he was glad to get the exercise because he knew he was about ten pounds overweight. For the first couple of years after he had gone into hiding, he had made a point of exercising five days a week—calisthenics, weight-lifting, jogging through the woods. That, along with chopping wood and pumping water out of his cistern, had kept him nicely in shape. But for the past three or four years he had grown lazy: sleeping late, not watching his diet, lying around like a much older man. He had become complacent in his mountain hideaway. He felt safe there; only rarely did he feel threatened any more. After six years, he figured they had stopped looking for him.

Probably.

Maybe.

Tree and the woman arrived at the cabin just at twilight. It sat on a small clearing at the six-thousand-foot level in the Beaverhead Forest, just east of the Continental Divide. When the clouds were high, Chief Joseph Pass could be seen from the porch. If they were very high, one could regularly see the moon and the sun at the same time, in different parts of the sky. The natural beauty of the place was indelible. The woman didn't notice the scenery, however—she was too acutely aware of how isolated it was.

"Look, before we go in," Vi said, "I think we ought to get something straight. I had a falling-out with those other two guys because they had some weird ideas about how I should pay for my ride. I hope you're not thinking along those same lines as far as room-and-board goes."

"I'm not," Tree told her.

He said it a little too quickly to suit her. With a little too much determination. She hesitated on the porch, not following him into the cabin.

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"Listen, no offense, you understand," she said, "but you're not—well, *peculiar* or anything, are you? I mean, living up here all alone—"

Tree returned to the doorway and faced her. "Why don't you lighten up?" he said. "You'll be safe here. But if you don't believe me, hike on back down the mountain and make other arrangements."

"A girl can't be too careful, is all I mean. I have this problem in that men usually find me very attractive—"

"I don't," Tree assured her. "My taste runs to darker women. When I get lonely, I ride down to the Salmon River Reservation. Lots of nice Nez Perce and Shoshone women down there. They like me because my skin's light. I stay for a few days and then come back home. I was just down to the reservation last week, so I'm settled for about a month now. Like I said, you're safe."

Turning, he walked away. When she finally came into the cabin several minutes later, she found her suitcase on the bed in the tiny bedroom. Tree had decided, he told her, to sleep on the couch. Not because he was such a gentleman—he just didn't like the idea of leaving her out in the main room alone all night. The main room—which was a kitchen-living room—was where he had the television, shortwave receiver, his books, magazines, guns, ammunition: things he didn't want her fooling with. Sleeping on the couch, he could keep an eye on everything.

After Tree took care of Elk, rubbing her down briskly and putting her in the one-horse lean-to stable he had built onto the rear of the cabin, he came back into the cabin just in time to hear Vi, in the bedroom, say, "Damn!"

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"My cosmetics bag! It was in the back seat of the car! I don't have any makeup!"

"Tough break," he said indifferently.

He went into the kitchen, unpacked his supplies, and began preparing supper. Presently Vi came in.

"Listen, I can cook," she said. "Why don't you let me fix supper?"

"I'll do it," he replied. "I know how I like things."

Vi shrugged. Strolling, she looked the place over. "You've got enough books," she commented. "All the comforts of home, too—radio, TV, everything. How do you manage it 'way up here?"

"I manage," Tree said. He was not about to share any confidences with her. For electrical power he had illegally tapped into a main power line running across the mountain. For water he had a cistern

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next to the cabin. For television, a microwave dish he had assembled on the roof, which stole signals from the sky. For shortwave, a simple antenna wire strung up a high tree. For backup, a battery-operated generator, constantly charging off the tapped electricity.

"Okay if I look at these old magazines?" she asked, standing in front of the bookcase where he kept them.

"Sure. But do me a favor first. Step around back and make sure I closed the lean-to door, will you? I don't want Elk to be in a draft."

While she was out of the cabin, he went quickly to the bookcase, took a small scrapbook from one of the shelves, and put it on top of the bookcase out of her sight and reach. Then he returned to the kitchen.

They shared an uneasy supper, both telling whatever lies they felt necessary to project or protect their respective images. Tree told Vi he had originally come to live in the mountains to avoid the Vietnam draft, and had not gone back because he didn't relish the idea of steady employment. He said he worked down at the roadhouse restaurant during tourist season to earn enough to live on the rest of the year. Vi told Tree that she was a model on her way to Chicago for a job at Marshall Field's. Because she wasn't due there for another week, she had accepted a ride with the two guys in the Cadillac. She had thought, she said, that they were legitimate businessmen, traveling salesmen or something, and had been very surprised to learn they were just a couple of petty hustlers.

Because each of them was lying, neither Tree or the woman asked any questions of the other. They kept conversation to a minimum. After supper, Vi found that she was extremely tired. It was the climb and the altitude, Tree told her. "Your blood's thinned out. Better go to bed." She did, and fell into an immediate deep sleep.

When he was sure she was sleeping soundly, Tree slipped into the bedroom and got her purse. He brought it into the main room and searched it. There was an expired Illinois driver's license, a faded Social Security card, an address book containing no names that Tree recognized, a blank, unmailed postcard with a photo on it of Harold's Club in Reno, and twelve dollars.

A loser's purse for sure, Tree thought. He put it back in the bedroom.

Later, Tree fed Elk, opened his nightly bottle of beer, chewed a little peyote, and watched an old John Garfield movie on some channel he was pulling in from a satellite. When the movie was over, he spread his sleeping bag on the couch, stripped, climbed in, and went

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to sleep, the forty-five lying loaded and cocked on the floor just inches away.

The next morning, Vi found him out back of the cabin with his wild things. She stood out of sight around a corner of the cabin and watched him feed them from the sack of pellet food he had brought back. She was amazed at the number and variety of the animals. Some of them she couldn't even identify—others, like the rabbits, squirrels, and small deer she knew. Tree knelt right in their midst and fed them from his open hand. The sight of it was a wonder to her.

"You can come around and watch if you want to," he told her without looking around. "Just don't make any sudden moves."

Vi eased around the corner but stayed well back from the menagerie. "How'd you know I was there?" she asked curiously.

"This little mule deer told me," he said, scratching the middle forehead of a somewhat scroungy, unattractive deer. "I saw its nostrils flare—that meant a new scent was close by. Mule deer have very poor eyesight; they have to depend on their sense of smell for survival." He looked at her over his shoulder and grinned. "Plus which, I saw your shadow."

"Oh, you!" She moved a little closer. "What in the world are all of them? What's that reddish one with the yellow belly?"

"Ermine weasel. Turns pure white in the winter. That's when the trappers go after them."

"And that one, by the deer?"

"Pronghorn. It's a kind of bastard antelope." He stood up and started pointing. "That's a wolverine over there: baby wolf. This big guy with the white mark on his forehead is a badger. My mother's people named him. They called the white mark a 'badge.' I bet you didn't know 'badge' was an Indian word."

She shook her head. "No."

Tree smiled. "Most cops don't, either."

"What's that one, with the partly webbed feet?"

"That's the one the ladies like: she's a mink. Next to her there—that big shiny grey animal—that's a marten."

From a nearby limb came a clipped, scolding bird call. Tree looked over at a long-tailed black-and-white bird chattering noisily.

"All right," he said. He stepped out of the center of the wild things, closing the bag, and came over to where Vi stood. From a wooden storage box, he removed another bag and scooped out a handful of

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its contents. "Bird seed," he said. He took her hand. It felt good. "Come on."

She let him lead her over to a low aspen and watched him hold out his open hand to feed the bird. "It's a magpie," he told her. "Biggest nag in the woods. Never gives you a minute's peace if he's hungry." After a couple of minutes, he closed his hand. "That's enough, Porky. I named him Porky 'cause he's such a pig."

He bobbed his chin toward another tree, a spruce. "Want to see an owl?" They walked over to a low, heavily leafed limb where a small, unpleasant-looking owl was hunched. Its oversized head seemed to comprise half of its body, and its big direct eyes and hooked beak gave it a definite aura of hostility.

"Is it mad?" Vi asked, holding back tentatively.

"No," said Tree, "just sleepy. He'll burrow down into the leaves and go to sleep in a bit." Tree fed the owl, as he had the magpie, from his palm. "Mostly he eats forest mice, but he likes these seeds, too." With the last of the seed, he led Vi to a small flat boulder jutting up from the ground like a fist. He sprinkled the rest of the seed on the flat of the rock and drew Vi a few feet away from it. "Now you'll see my favorite wild thing," he said quietly.

As they watched, a glossy black bird with wild yellow eyes swooped gracefully onto the rock and, after a cautious look around, began eating. As it ate, it honed its already razor-sharp talons on the rock.

"That's Midnight," Tree told her. "A raven."

"Won't it eat out of your hand like the others?"

"Not yet. He doesn't trust me enough yet. Someday he will. In another few years."

They walked back to the rear of the cabin. A few of the wild things were still there. Vi shook her head in wonder. "I didn't know animals were that friendly."

"They aren't, as a rule," Tree said. "That wolverine there, she's a natural enemy to the mink, the rabbit, and the marten. They're usually her prey. And the badger generally goes after the ermine weasel when he sees one. But they know I don't allow any fighting here in the clearing. I chase them off if they start fighting. It doesn't take long for them to learn that not fighting is best. Animals are a lot smarter than people."

"You really love them, don't you? These animals?"

"Yeah, I guess I do," Tree admitted. "It makes me feel good when I bring two natural enemies together and get them both to eat out of my hand at the same time."

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"Too bad that can't be done with people," Vi remarked. "It would stop all the war and killing in the world."

"No, it wouldn't," Tree said quietly. "People would still kill, for sport. Man is the only animal that kills for sport. You'd never stop that. Man will always have to kill. It's his nature."

Vi stared at him. As he spoke, his eyes seemed to grow colder.

The next morning when Vi came out of the bedroom, Tree was at his shortwave set listening to an English-language broadcast from Moscow. "Don't look at me," she said. "I'm totally out of makeup and I look *awful*."

Tree did look at her, and liked what he saw. "You look fine to me," he said. "Nice and scrubbed." He switched off the radio. "Want to go fishing with me?" he asked. He didn't want to leave her alone in the cabin.

"I don't know how to fish."

"I'll teach you. Or you can just watch. We can take some food and have a picnic."

Vi consented and together they packed a knapsack with lunch. Tree got his lines and bait, and they trudged up-mountain several hundred yards toward a narrow stream of cold snow-water coming from high up.

"How come everything's always *up*hill?" Vi complained, taking his hand so he could help her. "Isn't anything ever downhill?"

"Nothing worthwhile," Tree replied matter-of-factly.

They walked along the stream and Tree showed her how to set fish lines without poles or other apparatus. "Poles scare fish off," he explained. "They cast a shadow over the water."

When he had the lines set, they walked on to a point where the stream bed dropped six feet, creating a low waterfall. There the water rushed and formed whitecaps, and occasionally they could see a mountain trout swimming upstream, actually jumping up the falling water. They found a place to open the knapsack and eat. While they were there, Vi told him about herself.

"I was one of those young girls with stars in her eyes who went out to California to get into the movies. Or TV. Or modeling—*anything*, you know, except the nine-to-five office bit. It took me a while to realize I wasn't the only one with big ideas. There were hundreds of others just like me. We were all pilgrims who made it to Mecca—only Mecca turned out to be Hustle City. I was lucky—I ended up waiting tables at a Hamburger Hamlet. A lot of others

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weren't lucky. They ended up on drugs or selling themselves on Hollywood Boulevard for some pimp, or even worse. That's why when the two sports in the Cadillac asked if I wanted a ride east, I took it."

"No modeling job at Marshall Field's?"

Vi shook her head. "The most I've got to look forward to is a monotonous job in some dull office."

"That's more than some people have got," Tree commented darkly.

That night, her third night at the cabin, Tree let her cook for him. She made breaded pork chops from his freezer and managed to whip up some decent mashed potatoes from his dehydrated food stock.

"Not bad," he said. "Where'd you learn to cook?"

"Marshall High School, on the west side of Chicago. Home Ec was required. Where'd you go to school?"

"A reservation in Idaho."

"What was it like living on a reservation?"

"Poor," he said quietly. "Cold poor. Hungry poor. Hard-knock poor."

"How'd you get away from it?"

"I joined the Army." He realized the slip at once.

"You told me you came up here to evade the draft," she reminded him.

Tree looked down at the table for a long, silent moment. Finally he met her eyes. "That was a lie. But I can't tell you the truth. Let's just leave it alone for the rest of the time you're here, okay?"

They resumed eating, with no further conversation for several minutes. Finally Vi put her fork down and rose.

"I told you the truth about me," she said. It was clearly an accusation. She left the table and went outside.

Tree finished his supper, cleared off the table, and washed the dishes. Then he got an apple out of the food locker for Elk and went outside. Vi was sitting on the porch looking up at a sky full of stars that looked close enough to touch.

"Want to feed this apple to Elk?" Tree asked.

"Elk doesn't like me," Vi said.

"She's just not used to you. Come on, you can feed her." Vi did not move. Tree coaxed her. "Come on. I'll show you how. It's easy. Come on."

Finally Vi got up and went with him around to the lean-to. Tree cut the apple into sixths and showed Vi how to hold her hand out

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straight, palm up, so that the horse could take the food with its lips and not hurt Vi's hand with its powerful teeth. Vi was nervous, but Elk, whose affections could always be bought with fresh apples, played the perfect lady and ate properly.

"Go ahead, scratch her neck," Tree said. "She likes that."

"Don't we all," Vi replied, mostly to herself.

Vi petted the Appaloosa for awhile, then Tree closed the stall and they returned to the porch.

"I'll let you help me feed the wild things in the morning if you like," he offered.

"You don't have to."

"I don't want you to be mad."

"I'm not. I don't blame you for not trusting me."

"It's not that I don't trust you. It's just something I don't talk about. Not to anybody."

She was sitting in a shaft of light from the window and Tree saw her shrug. "Okay," she said.

"I'm sorry."

Another shrug. "Sure."

They sat without speaking for ten minutes, listening to the night sounds of the cool, high-mountain evening. Finally Vi stood up. "I think I'll go to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Tree remained on the porch for a long time, thinking about things—the vivid, dangerous past, the nebulous, unsure future, and the clear, demanding present. He admitted to himself that he wanted the woman, then told himself in definite, forceful language that he could not have her. Alone is safest, he reminded himself. Alone is smartest. Alone is best.

He grunted softly. Alone was also loneliest.

It was midnight when he finally went inside, stripped down, and slid into his sleeping bag. But he couldn't sleep. It was as if he was waiting for something.

He was still awake when she came to him in the darkness.

At first they were skittish about her, made nervous by the sight and scent of her so close. But because they trusted Tree so completely, they gradually eased their way up to her. Soon she was kneeling in their midst just as Tree did, and they were nuzzling her hands, putting front paws up on her legs, making their individual little noises to get her attention. She learned that the mule deer and

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the pronghorn would nibble at her ears with their lips if she paid too much attention to the ground animals and not enough to them. Feeding the wild things was a decided thrill for Vi—she couldn't wait for the next day to feed them again.

"I want to feed them every morning!" she said with delight. Tree looked curiously at her and Vi's smile faded. "I forgot," she said. "I've only got two more mornings, haven't I? The bus comes over the mountain on Friday."

Tree nodded. "Yes. On Friday."

They went swimming that afternoon, in the same stream in which they'd fished the previous day. Vi thought she was going to freeze.

"It's like ice water!" she shrieked.

"It *is* ice water," Tree said, laughing. "It's melted snow from 'way up. Move around—you'll get warm."

She did move around, but she did not warm up. After five minutes she had to get out. Tree wrapped her in a blanket and left her on the bank while he swam for another quarter hour. When he came out, his tan body shone like the coats of the wild things who were his friends.

After their swim, they walked arm-in-arm back to the cabin and Tree built a fire. They stretched out on a Najavo blanket in front of the fireplace, chewed some peyote, slept, woke up and made love, and slept again.

That night, Tree said, "You don't want to leave, do you?"

Vi shrugged. "I don't want to mess with your life, Tree. You've got everything you want up here. The one thing you haven't got—well, it's available down on the Salmon River Reservation when you want it, and you don't have to bring it home with you." She looked away from him. "I think it would be bad for both of us if I stayed."

They didn't discuss it any further that night, each retreating into silence.

On Thursday morning, Tree was sick.

"My cooking," Vi said lightly. "Now you know why I've never married."

"Probably the peyote," he told her. "It gives you a great feeling, but sometimes it raises hell with the digestive system. How's your stomach?"

"Fine. Let me mix you some cold powdered milk—that'll probably settle it."

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The milk helped some, but later in the day he had severe nausea and a bad headache.

"Do you have any medicine up here at all?" Vi asked. He directed her to a cabinet in the kitchen where he had aspirin, codeine, and Valium tablets. She gave him two of each and made him take a nap in the bedroom.

While he was sleeping, she went to the bookcase and took down the scrapbook he had hidden on top of it. She had watched through the window the night he had put it there. Opening it on the table, she read the newspaper clippings he had saved. The stories they told were different, but they all had common headlines:

LABOR LEADER SLAIN, one read.

GANGLAND BOSS FOUND DEAD, read another.

WITNESS MURDERED IN HOTEL.

RACKETS INFORMER EXECUTED.

GAMBLER KILLED IN MIAMI.

The clippings had datelines covering a five-year period. The last one was dated six years earlier.

Tree came out of the bedroom while she still had the scrapbook open in front of her. He was very pale, but his eyes were still dark and dangerous. He was fully dressed and Vi couldn't tell whether he had his gun or not.

He sat down heavily across from her.

"You enjoy my press notices?" he asked.

Vi closed the scrapbook. "They ended six years ago. That was when you came to live up here. What happened?"

"They wanted me to hit a woman," he said. "A young woman with a brace on one leg, who was going into a convent of handicapped nuns who taught handicapped children. She was heir to a lot of money, but she was going to take a vow of poverty and give it all to the order she was joining. A cousin who was her only living relative bought the hit. Prior to then, I had never hit anybody but gangsters and punks—a stoolie now and then, a gambler who welshed on somebody. Now they wanted me to do a crippled young woman who never hurt nobody. They wanted me to run her down in the street so it'd look like a hit-and-run, an accident." Tree shook his head. "I couldn't do it. So I took off."

"And now there's a contract on *you,*" Vi concluded.

"A big one," Tree confirmed. "And it keeps getting bigger every year." Suddenly he buried his face in his hands. "I'm sick, Vi—" he said weakly.

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She helped him back to bed, mixed him some more powdered milk, and made him eat a few soda crackers to see if that would help calm his stomach.

Sitting on the bed beside him, she felt his forehead. "No fever," she reported.

"Maybe it's the flu," he said. "My muscles and joints ache like hell."

After he ate, she massaged him where he hurt and gave him more aspirin and Valium. Then she tucked him in and stroked his cheek.

"How'd you get to be a—you know," she asked curiously.

"A paid killer?" Tree smiled wanly. "In the Army. I was a P.O.W. I did time with a Ranger captain who had mob connections. When we were exchanged and sent home, he asked me to work for him. It sounded better than going back to the reservation." He reached up and touched her hand. "You won't go tomorrow, will you?"

"No. I won't leave you while you're sick."

He had a miserable night. Between bouts of diarrhea and vomiting, he was left weak and shaky. She helped him to and from bed, gave him more medication, more milk, more crackers. His muscle and joint aches agonized him all through the night—even codeine tablets failed to curb the pain.

Toward morning he still had no fever, but his pulse had become very weak and his eyes no longer looked threatening. When Vi took the gun from under his pillow, where she had noticed it, he didn't complain—he knew he did not have the strength to fire it, anyway. Still, he was relieved to see her merely lay it on the nearby bureau and leave it there.

Two hours after sun-up, he was breathing very lightly and was extremely pale. She was holding his head up, feeding him a little warm oatmeal.

"Feed them," he said feebly.

"I will," she assured him. "After I feed you. You're sick, they're not."

When he had eaten as much as she thought he could, she let his head back down and wiped his face with a damp cloth. She opened a window for him to get some fresh air and cleaned up the dishes they had used during the night. When she came back in to check on him, he was barely awake. Just enough to say faintly, "The wild things—"

"All right," she said. "I'll do it right now."

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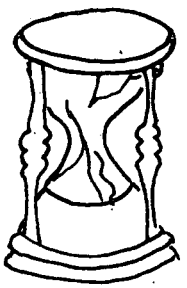
He gave her a faint smile. She bent and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Out back, Vi got a bucket of pellet food from the storage locker and went over to where the animals waited. She held out her hand to them, but they would not come. They merely stared at her. She tossed a handful of food to them, but they did not touch it. Maybe they smell the arsenic on my hands, she thought.

She shrugged, poured the bucket of food on the ground, and went back inside to see if Tree was in a coma yet.



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a ***NEW*** **Griswold story by**

ISAAC ASIMOV

Although Isaac Asimov has published a number of stories about Griswold, that venerable member of the Union Club, this is the first case he has related in the pages of EQMM. A lively collection of thirty of the short-short stories in this series, The Union Club Mysteries, *was published by Doubleday in August . . .*

THE SPECK

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Jennings pointed it out within five minutes of my arrival at the Union Club that night.

"You've got a speck on your shirt," he said. "Looks like tomato sauce. —It's right in front. Your jacket doesn't hide it," he added gratuitously.

I scowled at him. "I know it's there. A fresh shirt, too. I put it on just before going to dinner this evening. And I've had comments on the matter from my wife, thank you. She wanted me to change again."

Baranov said, "And you very rightly told her that you were going to spend your usual evening with your friends and it didn't matter how filthy-sloppy you were and, of course, she agreed."

They were baiting me, obviously. I knew they were, and yet I couldn't help responding. "It's a tiny speck," I said heatedly, "lost amid acres and acres of fresh and gleaming shirtfront. Why the devil make a fuss about it? Even with the speck, my shirt is probably cleaner than any other in the room. Look at Griswold," I said, pointing to where the old man nodded in his chair, his Scotch-and-soda held firmly in his hand by reflex action. "He must have a pint of Scotch-and-soda soaking various parts of his shirt."

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That was pure slander, of course, since no one had ever seen Griswold spill a drop of any drink he held, but I had to strike out, if only because I was furious with myself. Could I never eat dinner without sending a droplet of sauce or gravy flying in my own direction?

Griswold, to my total lack of surprise, had heard it all. One blue eye opened under its shaggy white eyebrow and he said to me, "A speck, however small, can be of key importance. Not in your case, of course, for you probably have on your clothes the finest collection of gravy drenchings in the world and one more doesn't matter. In other cases, however—" He shrugged, sipped with exaggerated care at his drink, and composed himself as though to sleep again.

"Are you thinking of something specific?" said Jennings unwarily, and both Griswold's eyes snapped open at once.

Since you ask [said Griswold] and seem interested, let me tell you the matter I have in mind.

It dates back to the year after World War II, when in the first flush of enthusiasm the victorious Allies were trying to find various people who had been involved in the slaughter of the innocents. Not all the villains were Germans, as it happened, and not all the victims were Jews.

The British had on their list, for instance, someone who had brought about the deaths of several dozen British prisoners-of-war. That villain had been smuggled into the camp as a French prisoner with the rank of lieutenant, a part he apparently played to perfection. He initiated the plan for escape and played a leading part in it all the way through, while keeping the Germans completely informed. The escape was entirely unsuccessful and the supposed Frenchman actually shot a few of the British himself. The Nazis had what they wanted. So spectacular was the failure that there were no further attempts at escape from that particular camp for the remainder of the war.

Identifying the villain, this Lieutenant Nobody, as he was called, was not easy. He had been removed from the camp after the aborted escape. Descriptions were vague, and he had been, in any case, disguised. The records uncovered at the camp were incomplete, naturally, between the ravages of war and the deliberate destruction by those in charge who wanted no trouble with vengeful victors.

About all that could be found out, as it happened, was that the supposed Frenchman was not a Frenchman, but a Canadian—a

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French-Canadian—who had lived most of his life in Montreal. There was no more than that. We had no record of his actual name, no photograph—not even a blurred snapshot—of his face, no details of any kind.

It made sense. As a Montrealer, it was quite possible he was thoroughly bilingual. He could pass as a Frenchman who could speak enough English to communicate, and he could also speak English well enough to pass as an American. There was some evidence, of a rather feeble nature, that he had indeed served the Nazis in the role of an American among American prisoners-of-war.

What's more, as a French-Canadian, it was quite possible that he had resented the ruling Anglo majority—who, in those days, controlled the Quebec economy totally—to the point of casting his lot in with the Germans.

The Americans were rather in a quandary, then, when an American noncom of superlatively innocent appearance was identified as Lieutenant Nobody.

It was not much of an identification. The accuser was a British soldier who had been a prisoner at the camp in question and who had been one of the very few who had survived the attempted escape. Two years had elapsed since he had last seen the man and all he could say in support of his contention was, essentially, "I tell you that's the face, that's the face."

It could have been the face, of course, but it's not uncommon for one person to resemble another and it was not anything one could sensibly use. The American was questioned, naturally. He, too, had been a prisoner-of-war, so that the accuser might possibly have seen him quite innocently at one time or another. People were occasionally shifted from one camp to another to break up any groupings that might be troublesome.

The American had his dog-tags. He had a history, both military and pre-military, he could reel off. It checked with Army records, as far as they went, but there was always the possibility that Lieutenant Nobody had been fitted out with the personality and records of a real American noncom who had died in combat—just enough of a possibility to make some people uneasy.

In the ordinary course of affairs, the noncom was sent back Stateside. Yet though the accusation was insufficient to warrant his being detained overseas, it was enough to worry the Department here in the United States.

They called me in. I was a young fellow then, and a civilian, but

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I already had a reputation for being able to see the horizon on a clear day, which made me rather a phenomenon among the usual cloudy eyed individuals that filled the Army then—as they do now.

I was called before a Colonel who, generally speaking, had no use for me—which didn't bother me, since I had no use for him. He said, "See here, Griswold, you speak to this guy and tell us whether he's an American or a Canadian."

I had been told the story so I said, "Why not just take him back to the hometown and check with his relatives?"

The Colonel said, "He doesn't have any close relatives. He was brought up in Ohio by an uncle who was a recluse and is dead now. He claims he doesn't know anyone out there very closely and vice versa. We checked and that's so. Of course, it's possible that he had met a lookalike from there some years ago, found out that the background was sufficiently obscure, and then took it over."

"Take him back to the hometown and see if he knows his way around. He'd know where the town drugstore was, wouldn't he?"

The Colonel looked impatient. "That takes time and money, and I need both for better things than this—unless you can give me reason to believe there's something to this accusation."

I said, with just a touch of sarcasm, "Does he know who won the World Series in 1941?"

The Colonel said, "Listen, Griswold, *I* don't know who won the World Series in 1941, so don't waste my time. You just do what I say. Talk to him and look for a speck, just one speck, of Canadian in him. If you come back with that, we'll see to it that he's turned inside out and emptied—but we need that speck to justify the trouble. You understand?"

I understood. "Yes, sir," I said. I knew how those things worked. If I found out something useful, the Colonel would use it and take the credit. Still, I had no choice but to go ahead.

The noncom was a Sergeant Drisack. He had the kind of beaten, anxious look you'd expect in a long-time prisoner who suddenly found himself under suspicion after his release for something he couldn't understand. Yet it seemed to me that underneath that there was a vein of hard shrewdness—which I knew very well might be my imagination.

There was nothing to do but engage him in conversation. I said, "Do you remember your address in Iowa, Sergeant?"

"Ohio, sir."

"Sorry. Do you remember the address?"

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"Yes, sir."

"You know how to write, of course."

"Yes, sir."

I placed a piece of paper before him, then handed him a pencil, putting it near his left hand, but he reached over with his right hand and took it.

"Just write it for me, will you?"

He did, and I took the paper from him and looked at it. It was the kind of writing one would expect of someone with a sixth-grade education, which was all that Drisack had had—if he were Drisack.

I said, "Can you write 'Des Moines?' "

He looked puzzled. "How do you spell it?"

"Oh, yes," I said, "you're not from Iowa." It seemed to me he looked amused, though I could see no clear sign of it.

"Have you traveled much?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Only while I was in the Army. They took me to France. Then I got captured and the krauts took me to Germany."

"Can you speak German?"

"I can say halt or marchieren. Things like that."

"Can you speak French?"

"Polly-voo, that's all."

"Ever been to Mexico?"

"No, sir."

I shoved the paper at him. "Write Guadalajara."

"What?" He looked completely blank, but his eyes seemed to glitter, or so it seemed to me.

"Well—write Mexico."

He did, quite quickly. He was not stupid—only uneducated, or appearing so.

"Have you ever been to Canada?"

"No, sir."

"You sure now? You never lived in Canada?"

He looked startled and shook his head.

"You never lived in Montreal?"

He shook his head. "No, sir."

"You've heard of it, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. It's in Canada, isn't it?"

"You never lived at 721 Sherwood Street in Montreal?"

He hesitated. "No, sir."

"Well, is there a Sherwood Street in Montreal?"

"I don't know, sir," he said humbly.

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I shoved a new piece of paper at him. "Write 721 Sherwood Street, Montreal. Go ahead!"

He looked utterly confused, but did so. As soon as he had finished, I took the paper and pencil from him and nodded to the guard, who took him away.

I then went to the Colonel and said, in a leisurely way, "I found the speck, Colonel." And I explained. Our so-called American noncom was Lieutenant Nobody, as a thoroughgoing investigation eventually proved, and the British hung him about six months later.

I said, suspiciously, "What gave him away?"

"You ought to be able to figure that out," said Griswold austerely. "I had him write Montreal, didn't I?"

"So?"

"So it has two pronunciations, totally different, with respect to all three vowels. The 'o' is short to English-speaking Canadians, long to French-speaking Canadians. The 'e' is a long 'e' to the English, a long 'a' to the French. And the 'a' is pronounced like 'aw' to the English but is short to the French."

"Yes, but he wrote the word. He didn't pronounce it."

"Well, I acted like such a jackass in the interrogation, I was so bumbling and transparent in my questions, that he couldn't help but relax, so he lost that fine grip on himself and wrote as though he were a French-Canadian. When an 'e' in French is pronounced 'ay' it has an acute accent above it, a straight line moving from upper right to lower left, so that you have 'Montréal.' The supposed noncom couldn't keep himself from making a speck over the 'e' in 'Montreal,' and that speck gave him away. No uneducated American could have done it."

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a *NEW* short story by

DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

In 1963, Dorothy Salisbury Davis won second prize in EQMM's annual short-story contest for "By the Scruff of the Soul." Set in Webbtown, in the Ragapoo Hills, it told of the murder of a hometown boy, Reuben White, by Clara McCracken, who with her older sister Maudie ran the rundown Red Lantern Inn, which had been in the family since the American Revolution.

The story ended with Hank, the lawyer narrator, saying, "Clara—she'll be getting out soon, coming home to the hills, and maybe opening up The Red Lantern again. I defended her at the trial, pleading temporary insanity. Nobody was willing to say she was insane exactly. We don't like saying such things about one another up here. But the jury agreed she was a temporary sort of woman. Twenty years to life, she got, with time off for good behavior . . ."

And here is the sequel to Clara's story, again told by Hank. It is a good hard look at the behavior of men and women, between each other and among themselves. That the setting is as rural as it is may, or may not, explain the perversities and idiosyncrasies. You decide. If you can . . .

NATURAL CAUSES

by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

When Clara McCracken got out of state prison I was waiting to bring her home. We shook hands at the prison gate when she came through, and the first thing I was struck with was how her eyes had gone from china-blue to a gunmetal-grey. In fifteen years she'd come to look a lot like her late sister, Maud.

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There'd been twenty years' difference in the ages of the McCracken sisters, and they were all that was left of a family that had come west with the building of the Erie Canal and settled in the Ragapoo Hills, most of them around Webbtown, a place that's no bigger now than it was then. Maudie ran the Red Lantern Inn, as McCrackens had before her, and she raised her younger sister by herself. She did her best to get Clara married to a decent man. It would have been better for everybody if she'd let her go wild the way Clara wanted and married or not married, as her own fancy took her.

Maudie was killed by accident, but there was no way I could prove young Reuben White fell into Maudie's well by accident. Not with Clara saying she'd pushed him into it and then taking the jury up there to show them how. She got more time than I thought fair, and for a while I blamed myself, a backwoods lawyer, for taking her defense even though she wouldn't have anybody else. Looking back, I came to see that in Ragapoo County then, just after giving so many of our young men to a second World War, Reuben White was probably better thought of than he ought to have been. But that's another story and the page was turned on it when Clara went to prison. Another page was turned with her coming out.

She stood on the comfortable side of the prison gate and looked at my old Chevrolet as though she recognized it. She could have. It wasn't even new when she got sent up, as they used to say in those Big House movies. The farthest I've ever driven that car on a single journey was the twice I visited her, and this time to bring her home. Then she did something gentle, a characteristic no one I knew would've given to Clara—she put out her hand and patted the fender as though it was a horse's rump.

I opened the door for her and she climbed in head first and sorted herself out while I put her canvas suitcase in the back. There were greys in her bush of tawny hair and her face was the color of cheap toilet paper. Squint lines took off from around her eyes. I didn't think laughing had much to do with them. She sat tall and bony in her loose-hung purple dress and looked straight ahead most of the drive home.

About the first thing she said to me was, "Hank, anybody in Webbtown selling television sets?"

"Prouty's got a couple he calls demonstrators." Then I added, "Keeps them in the hardware shop."

Clara made a noise I guess you could call a laugh. Prouty also runs the only mortuary in the town.

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"You'd be better sending away to Sears Roebuck," I said. "You pay them extra and they provide the aerial and put it up. I wouldn't trust old Prouty on a ladder these days. I wouldn't trust myself on one."

I could feel her looking at me, but I wasn't taking my eyes off the road. "Still playing the fiddle, Hank?" she asked.

"Some. Most folks'd rather watch the television than hear me hoeing down. But I fiddle for myself. It's about what I can do for pleasure lately. They dried up the trout stream when they put the highway through. Now they're drilling for oil in the hills. That's something new. I thought coal maybe someday, or even natural gas. But it's oil and they got those dipsy-doodles going night and day."

"Making everybody rich as Indians," Clara said, and she sounded just like Maudie. That was something Maudie would have said in the same deadpan way.

What I came out with then was something I'd been afraid of all along. "Maudie," I said, "you're going to see a lot of changes."

"Clara," she corrected me.

"I'm sorry, Clara. I was thinking of your sister."

"No harm done. You'd have to say there was a family resemblance among the McCrackens."

"A mighty strong one."

"Only trouble, there's a terrible shortage of McCrackens." And with that she exploded such a blast of laughter I rolled down the window to let some of it out.

I felt sorry for Clara when we drove up to the Red Lantern. It was still boarded up and there was writing on the steps that made me think of that Lizzie Borden jingle, "Lizzie Borden took an axe . . ." Having power of attorney, I'd asked Clara if I should have the place cleaned out and a room fixed up for her to come home to, but she said no. It wasn't as though there wasn't any money in the bank. The state bought a chunk of McCracken land when they put through the highway.

While I was trying the keys in the front door, Clara stood by the veranda railing and looked up at the Interstate, maybe a half mile away. You can't get on or off it from Webbtown. The nearest interchange is three miles. But one good thing that happened in the building of the road, they bulldozed Maudie's well and the old brewhouse clear out of existence. Clara'd have been thinking of that

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while I diddled with the lock. I got the door open and she picked up her suitcase before I could do it for her.

The spider webs were thick as lace curtains and you could almost touch the smell in the place, mold and mice and the drain-deep runoff of maybe a million draws of beer. You couldn't see much with the windows boarded up, but when you got used to the twilight you could see enough to move around. A row of keys still hung under numbers one to eight behind the desk. As though any one of them wouldn't open any door in the house. But a key feels good when you're away from home, it's a safe companion.

The stairs went up to a landing and then turned out of sight. Past them on the ground floor was the way to the kitchen and across from that the dining room. To the right where the sliding doors were closed was the lounge. To the left was the barroom where, for over a hundred and fifty years, McCrackens had drawn their own brew. I knew the revenue agent who used to come through during Prohibition. He certified the beer as three point two percent alcohol, what we used to call near-beer. The McCracken foam had more kick than three point two.

Clara set her suitcase at the foot of the stairs and went into the barroom. From where I stood I could see her back and then her shape in the backbar mirror and a shadow behind her that kind of scared me until I realized it was myself.

"Hank?" she said.

"I'm here."

She pointed at the moosehead on the wall above the mirror. "That moose has got to go," she said. "That's where I plan to put the television."

I took that in and said, "You got to have a license, Clara, unless you're going to serve soda pop, and I don't think you can get one after being where you were."

I could see her eyes shining in the dark. "You can, Hank, and I'm appointing you my partner."

Clara had done a lot of planning in fifteen years. She'd learned carpentry in prison and enough about plumbing and electric wiring to get things working. I asked her how she'd managed it, being a woman, and she said that was how she'd managed it. Her first days home I brought her necessities up to her from the town. The only person I'd told about her coming out was Prouty and he's close-mouthed. You couldn't say that for Mrs. Prouty. . . It's funny how

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you call most people by their Christian names after you get to know them, and then there's some you wouldn't dare even when you've known them all your life. Even Prouty calls her Mrs. Prouty.

Anyway, she's our one female elder at the Community Church and she was probably the person who put Reverend Barnes onto the sermon he preached the Sunday after Clara's return—all about the scribes and the Pharisees and how no man among them was able to throw the first stone at the woman taken in adultery. Adultery wasn't the problem of either of the McCracken sisters. It was something on the opposite side of human nature, trying to keep upright as the church steeple. But Reverend Barnes is one of those old-time Calvinists who believe heaven is heaven and hell is hell and whichever one you're going to was decided long ago, so the name of the sin don't matter much.

I was hanging a clothesline out back for Clara Monday morning when maybe a dozen women came up the hill to the Red Lantern bearing gifts. I stayed out of sight but I saw afterwards they were things they'd given thought to—symbolic things like canned fish and flour, bread and grape juice, what you might call biblical things. When Clara first saw them coming she went out on the veranda. She crossed her arms and spread her feet and took up a defensive stand in front of the door. The women did a queer thing: they set down what they were carrying, one after the other, and started to applaud. I guess it was the only way they could think of on the spot to show her they meant no ill.

Clara relaxed and gave them a roundhouse wave to come on up. They filed into the inn and before the morning was over they'd decided among themselves who was going to make curtains, who knew how to get mildew out of the bed linens, who'd be best at patching moth holes, things like that. Anne Pendergast went home and got the twins. They were about fourteen, two hellions. She made them scrub out every word that was written on the steps.

During the week I went over to the county seat with Clara to see if she could get a driver's license. I let her drive the Chevy, though I nearly died of a heart attack. She had it kicking like an army mule, but we did get there, and she could say that she'd driven a car lately. I watched with a sick feeling while the clerk made out a temporary permit she could use until her license came. Then, without batting an eye at me, she asked the fellow if he could tell us who to see about applying for a liquor license. He came out into

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the hall and pointed to the office. Yes, sir. Clara had done a lot of planning in fifteen years.

It was on the way back to Webbtown that she said to me, "Somebody's stolen Pa's shotgun, Hank."

"I got it up at my place, Clara. You sure you want it back?" It was that gun going off that killed Maudie and I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you what happened back then.

Clara was a wild and pretty thing and Maudie was encouraging this middle-aged gent, a paint salesman by the name of Matt Sawyer, to propose to her. This day she took him out in the hills with the shotgun, aiming to have him scare off Reuben White, who was a lot more forward in his courting of Clara. It was Maudie flushed the young ones out of the sheepcote and then shouted at Matt to shoot. She kept shouting it and so upset him that he slammed the gun down. It went off and blew half of Maudie's head away.

I don't think I'm ever going to forget Matt coming into town dragging that gun along the ground and telling us what happened. And I'm absolutely not going to forget going up the hill with Matt and Constable Luke Weber—and Prouty with his wicker basket. Clara came flying to meet us, her gold hair streaming out in the wind like a visiting angel. She just plain threw herself at Matt, saying how she loved him. I told her she ought to behave herself and she told me to hush or I couldn't play fiddle at their wedding. Luke Weber kept asking her where Reuben was and all she'd say in that airy way of hers was, "Gone."

I couldn't look at Maudie without getting sick, so I went to the well and tried to draw water. The bucket kept getting stuck, which was how we came to discover Reuben, head down, feet up, in the well. When the constable asked Clara about it, she admitted right off that she'd pushed him.

Why? Luke wanted to know.

At that point she turned deep serious, those big eyes of hers like blue saucers. "Mr. Weber, you wouldn't believe me if I told you what Reuben White wanted me to do with him in the sheepcote this afternoon. And I just know Matt won't ever want me to do a thing like that." I pleaded her temporarily insane. I might have tried to get her off for defending her virtue—there was some in town who saw it that way—but by the time we came to trial I didn't think it would work with a ten-out-of-twelve male jury.

But to get back to what I was saying about Clara wanting the

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shotgun back, I advised her not to put it where it used to hang over the fireplace in the bar.

"Don't intend to. I got noplace else for the moosehead."

I took the gun up to her the next day and it wasn't long after that I learned from Prouty she'd bought a box of shells and some cleaning oil. Prouty wanted to know if there wasn't some law against her having a gun. I said I thought so and we both let it go at that. Clara bought her television from him. The first I heard of her using the gun—only in a manner of speaking—was after she'd bought a used car from a lot on the County Road. It was a Studebaker, a beauty on the outside, and the dealer convinced her it had a heart of gold. The battery fell out first, and after that it was the transmission. She wanted me to go up and talk to him. I did and he told me to read the warranty, which I also did. I told Clara she was stuck with a bad bargain.

"Think so, Hank?"

The next thing I heard, she got Anne Pendergast and the twins to tow the Studebaker and her back to the used-car lot. The two women sent the boys home and then sat in Clara's car until the dealer finally came out to them. "Like I told your lawyer, lady, it's too bad, but . . ." He said something like that, according to Anne, and Clara stopped him right there. "I got me another lawyer," she said and jerked her thumb toward the back seat, where the old shotgun lay shining like it had just come off the hunters' rack in Prouty's. Anne asked him if he'd ever heard of Clara McCracken.

Seemed like he had, for when Clara drove up to where I was painting the Red Lantern sign she was behind the wheel of a red Chevy roadster with a motor that ran like a tomcat's purr.

"How much?" I wanted to know. Her funds were going down fast.

She opened the rumble seat and took out the shotgun. "One round of shot," she said. "That's about fifteen cents."

I didn't say anything in the town about the partnership I'd drawn up so that Clara could reopen the bar in the Red Lantern. For one thing, I wasn't sure when we'd get the license if we got it, even though Clara was moving full steam ahead. For another thing, I had to stop dropping in at Tuttle's Tavern. I just couldn't face Jesse Tuttle after setting up in competition, even though it was a mighty limited partnership I had with Clara. I didn't want to be an innkeeper and it riled that McCracken pride of hers to have to go outside the family after a hundred and fifty years. We wound up agreeing

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I was to be a silent partner. I was to have all the beer I could drink free. That wasn't going to cost her much. Even in the days of Maudie's Own Brew, I never drank more than a couple of steins in one night's sitting.

The license came through midsummer along with instructions that it was to be prominently displayed on the premises at all times. Clara framed it and hung it where you'd have needed a pair of binoculars to see what it was. By then the rooms upstairs had been aired out, the curtains hung, and all the mattresses and pillows treated to a week in the sun. Downstairs, the lounge was open to anybody willing to share it with a horde of insects. Prouty had ordered her some of those fly-catching dangles you string up on the lightbulbs, but they hadn't come yet. What came with miraculous speed was a pretty fair order of whiskeys and a half dozen kegs of beer with all the tapping equipment. I asked Clara how she decided on which brewery she was going to patronize.

She said the girls advised her.

And, sure enough, when I spoke to Prouty about it later he said, "So that's why Mrs. Prouty was asking what my favorite beer was. Didn't make sense till now. We ain't had a bottle of beer in the house since she got on the board of elders."

"Didn't you ask her what she wanted to know for?"

"Nope. I wanted to be surprised when the time came."

I suppose it was along about then I began to get a little niggling tinkle in my head about how friendly Clara and the women were. Most of those girls she spoke of were women ranging from thirty to eighty-five years old.

Going across the street and up the stairs to my office over Kincaid's Drugstore, I counted on my fingers this one and that of them I'd seen up there since Clara came home. I ran out of fingers and I'd have run out of toes as well if I'd included them.

Jesse Tuttle was sitting in my office waiting for me, his chair tilted back against the wall. I don't lock up in the daytime and the day I have to I'll take down my shingle. I felt funny, seeing Tuttle and feeling the way I did about competing with him, so as soon as we shook hands I brought things right out into the open. "I hope you don't take it personal, Jesse, that I'm helping Clara McCracken get a fresh start."

Jesse's a big, good-natured man with a belly that keeps him away from the bar, if you know what I mean. It don't seem to keep him

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away from Suzie. They got nine kids and a couple more on the hillside. "I know it's not personal, Hank, but it's not what you'd call friendly, either. I was wondering for a while if there was something personal between you and her, but the fellas talked me out of that idea."

I don't laugh out loud much, but I did then. "Jesse, I'm an old rooster," I said, "and I haven't noticed if a hen laid an egg in God knows how long."

"That's what we decided, but there's one thing you learn in my business: don't take anything a man says about himself for gospel. Even if he's telling the truth, it might as well be a lie, for all you know listening to him. Same thing in your business, ain't that so?"

"Wouldn't need witnesses if it wasn't," I said.

I settled my backside on the edge of the desk and he straightened up the chair. I'd been waiting for it to collapse, all the weight on its hind legs. He folded his arms. "What's going on up there, Hank?"

"Well, from what she said the last time we talked, she plans to open officially when the threshing combine comes through." We do as much farming in Ragapoo County as anything else, just enough to get by on. But we grow our own grain, and the harvest is a pretty big occasion.

"She figures on putting the crew up, does she?"

"She's got those eight rooms all made up and waiting. She got to put somebody in them. I can't see her getting the cross-country traffic to drop off the Interstate."

Tuttle looked at me with a queer expression on his face. "You don't think she'd be figuring to run a house up there?"

"A bawdy house?"

Tuttle nodded.

I shook my head. "No, sir. I think that's the last thing Clara'd have in mind."

"I mean playing a joke on us, paying us back for her having to go to prison."

"I just don't see it, Jesse. Besides, look at all your womenfolk flocking up there to give her a hand."

"That's what I am looking at," he said.

Every step creaked as he lumbered down the stairs. I listened to how quiet it was with him gone. I couldn't believe Jesse was a mean man. He wouldn't start a rumor if he didn't think there was something to back it up with: Not just for business. We don't do things like that in Webbtown, I told myself. We're too close to one another

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for any such shenanigans. And I had to admit I wouldn't put it past a McCracken to play the town dirty if she thought the town had done it to her first. I certainly wouldn't have put it past Maudie. There was something that kind of bothered me about what was taking place in my own head: I kept mixing up the sisters. It was like Maudie was the one who had come back.

Clara drove eighty miles across two counties to intercept the threshing combine—ten men and some mighty fancy equipment that crisscross the state this time every year. She took Anne Pendergast and Mary Toomey with her. Mary's a first cousin of Prouty's. And on the other side of the family she was related to Reuben White, something Prouty called my attention to. Reuben's folks moved away after the trial. It wasn't so much grief as shame. I didn't like doing it, but it's a lawyer's job, and I painted the boy as pretty much a dang fool to have got himself killed that way.

The women came home late afternoon. I saw them driving along Main Street after collecting all the Pendergast kids into the rumble seat. Anne had farmed them out for the day. I headed for the Red Lantern to see what happened. Clara was pleased as jubilee: the combine crew had agreed to route themselves so as to spend Saturday night in Webbtown.

"And they'll check into the Red Lantern?" I said. Ordinarily they split up among the farmers they serviced and knocked off five percent for their keep.

"Every last man. Barbecue Saturday night, Hank."

"What if it rains?"

"I got Mrs. Prouty and Faith Barnes working on it—the minister's wife?"

"I know who Faith Barnes is," I said, sour as pickle brine. The only reassuring thing I felt about the whole situation was that Mrs. Prouty was still Mrs. Prouty.

I came around. The whole town did. Almost had to, the women taking the lead right off. Clara invited everybody, at two dollars a head for adults, fifty cents for kids under twelve. All you could eat and free beer, but you paid for hard liquor. I recruited young Tommy Kincaid and a couple of his chums to dig the barbecue pits with me. Prouty supervised. Mrs. Prouty supervised the loan and transfer of tables and benches from the parish house. They used the Number One Hook and Ladder to move them, and I never before knew a

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truck to go out of the firehouse on private business except at Christmastime when they take Jesse Tuttle up and down Main Street in his Santa Claus getup.

Saturday came as clear a day as when there were eagles in the Ragapoo Hills. Right after lunch the town youngsters hiked up to the first lookout on the County Road. It reminded me of when I was a kid myself and a genuine circus would come round that bend and down through the town. I'd expected trouble from the teenage crowd, by the way, with Clara coming home. You know the way they like to scare themselves half out of their wits with stories of murder and haunted houses. The Red Lantern seemed like fair game for sure. Maybe the Pendergast twins took the curse off the place when they scrubbed the steps, I thought, and then I knew right off: it was their mothers who set down the law on how they'd behave toward Clara. In any case, it would have taken a lot of superstition to keep them from enjoying the harvest holiday.

Along about four o'clock the cry came echoing down the valley, "They're coming! They're coming!" And sure enough, like some prefabricated monster, the combine hove into view. Tractors and wagons followed, stopping to let the kids climb aboard. Behind them were the farmers' pleasure cars, women and children and some of the menfolk, dressed, you'd have thought, for the Fourth of July. The only ones left behind came as soon as the cows were let out after milking.

There was a new register on the desk and one man after another of the harvesters signed his name, picked up the key, and took his duffle bag upstairs. They came down to shower in the basement, and for a while there you couldn't get more than a trickle out of any other tap in the house. By the time they were washed up, half the town had arrived. I never saw our women looking prettier, and I kept saying to myself, gosh darn Tuttle for putting mischief in my mind. Even Clara, with color now in her cheeks, looked less like Maudie and more like the Clara I used to know.

The corn was roasting and the smell of barbecued chickens and ribs had the kids with their paper plates dancing in and out of line. There were mounds of Molly Kincaid's potato salad and crocks full of home-baked beans, great platters of sliced beefsteak tomatoes, fresh bread, and a five-pound jar of sweet butter Clara ordered from the Justin farm, delivered by Nellie Justin. Clara sent her to me to be paid her three dollars, but Nellie said to let it take care of her

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and Joe and the kids for the barbecue. Neither one of us was good at arithmetic. Peach and apple pies which any woman in town might have baked were aplenty and you can't believe what a peach pie's like baked with peaches so ripe you catch them dropping off the trees.

It was along about twilight with the men stretched out on the grass and the women sitting round on benches or on the veranda, dangling their feet over the side, when I tuned up my fiddle and sawed a few notes in front of the microphone. I never was amplified before and I don't expect to be again, but Dick Moran who teaches history, English, and music at the high school set up a system he'd been tinkering with all summer and brought along his own guitar. We made a lot of music, with everybody clapping and joining in. Real old-fashioned country. You might say people danced by the light of the moon—it was up there—but we had lantern light as well. I'd called round that morning and asked the farmers for the loan of the lanterns they use going out to chores on winter mornings. And when it finally came time for these same farmers to go home, they took their lanterns with them. One by one, the lights disappeared like fireflies, fading away until the only outdoor light was over the hotel entrance, and it was entertaining a crowd of moths and June bugs, gnats and mosquitoes.

Most people who lived in town weren't set on going home yet. Tuttle had closed up for the evening, not being a man to miss a good meal, but he said he thought he'd go down now and open up the tavern. Tuttle's Tavern never was a place the women folk liked to go, but now they said so right out loud.

Without even consulting me, Clara announced I'd fiddle in the lounge for a while. The women took to the idea straight off and set about arrangements. The old folks, who'd had about enough, gathered the kids and took them home. The teenagers went someplace with their amplifying history teacher and his guitar. The men, after hemming and hawing and beginning to feel out of joint, straggled down to Tuttle's. By this time the harvesters, with their bright-colored shirts and fancy boots, were drinking boilermakers in the bar. I didn't like it, but they were the only ones Clara was making money on, and she kept pouring. Prouty hung around for a while, helping move furniture. I asked him to stay, but he must have sneaked away while I was tuning up.

It gave me a funny feeling to see those women dancing all by themselves. I don't know why exactly. Kind of a waste, I suppose.

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But they sure didn't mind, flying and whirling one another and laughing in that high musical trill you don't often hear from women taught to hold themselves in. A funny feeling, I say, and yet something woke up in me that had been a long time sleeping.

Clara came across the hall from the taproom now and then, hauling one of the harvesters by the arm and kind of pitched him into the dance. His buddies would come to the door and whoop and holler and maybe get pulled in themselves. I kept thinking of my chums, sulking down at Tuttle's. I also thought Clara was wasting a lot of the good will she'd won with the barbecue. Man and wife were going to have to crawl into bed alongside each other sometime during the night.

Along about midnight Clara announced that it was closing time. Everybody gave a big cheer for Hank. It was going to take more than a big cheer to buoy me up by then. I could've wrung out my shirt and washed myself in my own sweat.

I couldn't swear that nothing bawdy happened the whole night. Those harvesters had been a long time from home and some of our women were feeling mighty free. But I just don't think it did, and I'll tell you why: Clara, when she pronounced it was closing time, was carrying a long birch switch, the kind that whistles when you slice the air with it, and the very kind Maudie had taken to Reuben White one night when he danced too intimate with Clara.

I was shivering when I went down to bed. I thought of stopping by Tuttle's, but the truth was I didn't even want to know if he was still open. I'd kept hoping some of the men would come back up to the Red Lantern, but nobody did. I did a lot of tossing and turning, and I couldn't have been long asleep when the fire siren sounded. I hadn't run with the engines for a long time, but I was out of the house and heading for the Red Lantern before the machines left the firehouse. I just knew if there was trouble that's where it was.

I didn't see any smoke or fire when I got to the drive, but Luke Weber, our same constable, waved me off the road. I parked and started hiking through the grass. The fire trucks were coming. I started to run. When I got almost to where we'd dug the barbecue pits, something caught my ankle and I fell flat to the ground. Somebody crawled up alongside me.

"It's Bill Pendergast, Hank. Just shut up and lie low."

I couldn't have laid much lower.

The fire trucks screamed up the drive, their searchlights playing

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over the building, where, by now, lights were going on in all the upstairs rooms.

Pendergast said, "Let's go," and switched on his flashlight.

A couple of minutes later I saw maybe a half dozen other flashes playing over the back and side doors to the inn. By the time I got around front, Clara was standing on the veranda with the fire chief. She was wearing a negligee you could've seen daylight through if there'd been daylight. The harvesters were coming downstairs in their underwear. A couple of the volunteer firemen rushed up the stairs, brandishing their hatchets and their torches.

By then I'd figured out what was happening and it made me sick, no matter what Tuttle and them others thought they were going to flush out with the false alarm. Not a woman came down those stairs or any other stairs or out any window. They did come trooping down the County Road, about a dozen of them. Instead of going home when Clara closed, they'd climbed to where they could see the whole valley in the moonlight. The fire chief apologized for the invasion as though it had been his fault.

"I hope you come that fast," Clara said, "when there's more fire than smoke."

I was up at the Red Lantern again on Sunday afternoon when the harvesters moved on, heading for their next setup in the morning. Clara bought them a drink for the road. One of them, a strapping fellow I might have thrown a punch at otherwise, patted Clara's behind when she went to the door with them. She jumped and then stretched her mouth in something like a smile. I listened to them say how they'd be back this way in hunting season. They all laughed at that and I felt I was missing something. When one of them tried to give me five bucks for the fiddling, I just walked away. But I watched to see if any extra money passed between them and Clara. That negligee was hanging in my mind.

A few nights later I stopped by Tuttle's. I figured that since I'd laid low with the fellows I might as well stand at the bar with them, at least for half my drinking time. I walked in on a huddle at the round table where there's a floating card game going on most times. But they weren't playing cards and they looked at me as though I'd come to collect the mortgage. I turned and started to go out again.

"Hey, Hank, come on back here," Pendergast called. "Only you got to take your oath along with the rest of us never to let on what we're talking about here tonight."

"What's the general subject?" I asked.

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"You know as well as we do," Jesse Tuttle said.

"I reckon." I stuck my right hand in the air as though the Bible was in my left.

"We were going to draw straws," Pendergast said, "but Billy Baldwin here just volunteered."

I pulled up a chair, making the ninth or tenth man, and waited to hear what Baldwin had volunteered to do. I haven't mentioned him before because there wasn't reason, even though Nancy Baldwin was one of the women that came whooping down the road after the fire alarm. Billy wasn't the most popular man in town—kind of a braggart and boring as a magpie. Whenever anybody had an idea, Billy had a better one, and he hardly ever stopped talking. The bus route he was driving at the time ran up-county, starting from the Courthouse steps, so he had to take his own car to and from his job at different times of day and night. By now you've probably guessed what he'd volunteered for.

I made it a point to stay away from the Red Lantern the night he planned to stop there. I got to admit, though, I was as curious as the rest of the bunch to learn how he'd make out with Clara, so I hung around Tuttle's with them. The funny thing was, I was the last man in the place. Long before closing time, Pendergast, then Prouty, then Kincaid, all of them dropped out and went home to their own beds. Tuttle locked up behind me.

The next day Baldwin stopped by the tavern on the way to work and told Jesse that nothing happened, that he'd just sat at the bar with Clara, talking and working up to things. "The big shot's getting chicken," Pendergast said when Tuttle passed the word.

None of us said much. Counting chickens. I know I was.

Well, it was a week before Billy Baldwin came in with his verdict. As far as he could tell, Clara McCracken might still be a virgin, he said. He'd finally come right out and slipped a twenty-dollar bill on the bar the last night and asked her to wear the negligee she'd had on the night of the false alarm. At that point, Clara reached for the birch stick behind the bar and he took off, leaving the money where it was.

"You're lucky she didn't reach for the shotgun," Prouty said.

We all chipped in to make up the twenty dollars.

Things quieted down after that and I continued to split my drinking time between Tuttle's and the Red Lantern. Clara would get the occasional oiler coming through to check the pumps, and the duck-

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and deer-hunting seasons were good business, but she never did get much of the town custom, and the rumors about her and that negligee hung on. It wasn't the sort of gear you sent away to Sears Roebuck for, but the post office in Webbtown was run by a woman then and I don't think any of us ever did find out where that particular garment came from. Maybe she'd sent away for it while she was still in prison. Like I said early on, Clara had done a lot of planning in fifteen years.

Now I just said things quieted down. To tell the truth, it was like the quiet before a twister comes through. I know I kept waiting and watching Clara, and Clara watched me watching her. One day she asked me what they were saying about her in the town.

I tried to make a joke of it. "Nothing much. They're getting kind of used to you, Clara."

She looked at me with a cold eye. "You in on that Billy Baldwin trick?"

I thought about the oath I was supposed to have sworn. "What trick?" I asked.

"Hank," she said, "for a lawyer you ain't much of a liar."

"I ain't much of a lawyer, either," I said. Then, looking her straight in the face, sure as fate straighter than I looked at myself, I said, "Clara, how'd you like to marry me?"

She set back on her heels and smiled in that odd way of having to work at it. "Thank you kindly." She cast her eyes up toward the license, which I'd just about forgotten. "We got one partnership going and I think that ought to do us—but I do thank you, old Hank."

I've often wondered what I'd have done if she'd said yes.

But I've come around since to holding with the Reverend Barnes. Everything was set in its course long before it happened—including Clara's planning.

September passed, October, and it came the full, cold moon of November. You could hear wolves in the Ragapoo Hills and the loons—and which is lonesomer-sounding I wouldn't say. I've mentioned before how light a sleeper I am. I woke up this night to a kind of whispering sound, a sort of swish, a pause, and then another swish, a pause, and then another. When I realized it was outside my window, I got up and looked down on the street.

There, passing in the silvery moonlight—a few feet between them (I think now to keep from speaking to one another)—the women of the town were moving toward the Red Lantern. By the time I got

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within sight of them up there, they'd formed a half circle around the front of the inn which was in total darkness. One of the women climbed the steps and went inside. I knew the door had not been locked since I unlocked it when I brought Clara home.

I kept out of sight and edged round back to where I had been the night of the false alarm. I saw the car parked there and knew it belonged to Billy Baldwin. If I could have found a way in time, I'd have turned in a false alarm myself, but I was frozen in slow motion. I heard the scream and the clatter in the building, and the front door banging open. Billy Baldwin came running out stark naked. He had some of his clothes with him, but he hadn't waited to put them on. Behind him was his wife Nancy, sobbing and crying and beating at him until one of the women came up and took her away down toward the town.

Billy had stopped in his tracks, seeing the circle of women. He was pathetic, trying to hide himself first and then trying to put his pants on, and the moonlight throwing crazy shadows on the women. Then I saw Clara come out the door on my side of the building. She was wearing the negligee and sort of drifted like a specter around the veranda to the front.

The women began to move forward.

Billy, seeing them come, fell on his knees and held out his hands, begging. I started to pray myself. I saw that every woman was carrying a stone. They kept getting closer, but not a one raised her arm until Clara went down and picked up a stone from her own drive which she flung at Billy.

He was still on his knees after that, but he fell almost at once beneath the barrage that followed. One of those stones killed him dead, though I didn't know it at the time.

Clara went back up the steps and picked her way through the stones. She kicked at what was left of poor, lying, cheating Billy as hard as she could. The women found more stones then and threw them at her until she fled into the inn and closed the door.

Nobody's been arrested for Billy's murder. I don't think anyone ever will be. It ought to be Clara, if anyone, but I'd have to bear witness that the man was still alive after she'd thrown the stone. She's never forgiven the women for turning on her. She kept telling me how glad she was when they came to take Billy in adultery. And I wore myself out asking her what the heck she thought she was doing.

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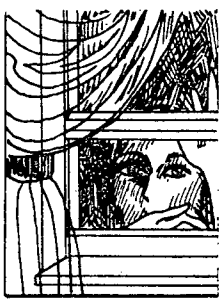
Along toward summer a baby boy was born to Clara. She had him christened Jeremiah McCracken after his grandfather. At the christening she said to me, "See, Hank. That's what I was doing." I'm going to tell you, I'm glad that when Jeremiah McCracken comes old enough to get a tavern license, I'll be in my grave by then. I hope of natural causes.

(Ed. Note: There will be a two-part interview with Dorothy Salisbury Davis in the January and February issues of *EQMM*.)



DETECTIVERSE

KILLER TYPE

by EILEEN ELLEN MURPHY

A novelist, Simon H. Trilling,
Wrote of murder suspenseful and chilling.
The way sales are rising,
It won't be surprising
If Simon himself makes a killing.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

In the November 1982 issue, you met Mazie Bong, extrovertish 62-year-old waitress at a Cactus County truckstop diner named Lulu's. If you doubted that Mazie had a heart of gold at the end of that story ("Not on the Menu"), we defy you to find otherwise at the conclusion of this one.

Finally the sheriff got into the act. "You weasel!" he shouted. "I'm gonna have an all-points bulletin out on you! Armed robbery! Assaulting an officer of the law! Assault with intent to kill! On Christmas Eve, too! What kind of upbringing have you had . . . ?"

CHRISTMAS EVE AT LULU'S

by ED CONROW

"Don't be a fool, mister. Put that gun down—"

What do I get in the way of response?

"Empty the cash drawer and make it quick."

That's how much he was listening to little old Mazie.

Here I am on Christmas Eve, feet hurting and back breaking from serving seventy-three turkey lunch specials. Of course, Thelma helped me a little. Very little. Naturally.

Some days nothing goes right.

It's 5:10 P.M. and I'm ready to close up and hit the road for home and clean up for the Christmas Eve service out at the Church in the Desert, and in walks this heist artist with a gun at least two miles long—and, zap, we're all making like idiots, waving our hands up in the air.

Criminy, Mazie Bong getting heisted on Christmas Eve!

Jasper's fit to be tied. "Shet up, you dimwit," was what the holdup man said to him when he protested a bit too much. A gun butt over the skull and Jasper's spatula flew halfway across the diner.

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"You—kid—find some rope and hogtie him." And so Raphael bound Jasper hand to foot and very unceremoniously dumped him into the potato bin.

Jasper was howling for the law and Lem Dooley, the sheriff, was looking mighty foolish down at the far end of the counter, what with being put out of action with his own handcuffs.

"Shoosh, Jasper," says Raphael. "He made me do it—I don't argue with a man who owns a pistola."

I'm counting out twenties and tens and have a stack of singles two inches high, hoping I won't have to empty the water glass full of tips I share with Raphael and Thelma.

Lem Dooley sure looks subdued and stupid. Him the sheriff of Cactus County, sitting there mopey-looking and hogtied by his own tools-of-the-trade.

Thelma Purdie? Glad you got around to wondering. All two hundred and thirty-five pounds of cuddly good time sitting alone in a booth and pouting. "Why didn't you hit Mexicali Sam's down on Roadrunner and Freeway if you're looking for a good day's pay?" she asks the gunman.

All she gets for her effort is a nasty look and a "Stuff it, sister."

It's raining out like cats and dogs.

All day long, the weather reports have been terrible—which is driving the weather forecasters slightly daffy as they can't read from their Phoenix, The Land of Perpetual Sunshine, scripts. Water is flowing down into the valley areas from the dams up north. There's flooding in the low-lying areas. Stay out of the desert washes and hit for the high ground, pilgrims.

Two bridges are washed out already.

"If I don't call in, Grozinski will be checking around looking for me," mutters Lem Dooley.

"Knock it off, Fats," orders the heist artist. He nudges me one in the ribs with the gun so that I lose count, and I'm over four hundred simoleons.

"You there," snarls El Bandito.

"Me?" answers Raphael in his lovable Tex-Mex manner of childish innocence, a girlie magazine sticking half out of a hip pocket. I can read Raphael's mind and five will get you ten he's cursing himself for not calling in sick for the day.

Big deal. Jasper's annual Christmas Eve Day turkey-special lunch.

Felice Natividad.

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SUSPENSE

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Sure, Merry Christmas. Some Christmas Eve this is.

"You've wiped the same spot on the counter for the last five minutes," says El Bandito to Raphael.

"I'm nervous," Raphael responds. "You make wiggles with the gun. With my luck, you'll aim at Mazie and I'll catch it because your trigger-finger is twitching too much."

El Bandito looks at me. He has large bushy eyebrows and is definitely the scary type.

"You put the Closed sign up?"

"Natch." I'm trying to remain calm, but my heart is skipping to a cha-cha beat.

"Lock the door like I told you?"

"Look, mister, you want Mazie to give you a show-and-tell routine? Of course I locked the door. That was ten minutes ago when you practically had the gun barrel in my ear. Here—take the money and run. Four hundred and twelve dollars and nineteen cents. You want two or three I.O.U.s also?"

"Hand it over—"

The lowlife. No manners whatsoever. Big fist holding a pistola and his other hand holding a brown paper sack.

Into the sack goes the money.

I take a mint out of a box on the counter and peel away the wrapper. I munch away and wonder now what's next.

"You guys got a freezer?"

Raphael is johnny-on-the-spot. His brains aren't too scrambled. "Won't do you any good. The lock on the door is broken." Smart kid, Raphael. He doesn't want us getting stashed into human popsicles amongst the ribs and hamburger meat, and an elk Jasper shot three years ago and never took to a taxidermist.

The telephone rings. I look at El Bandito, who is stuffing the bagful of money inside his shirt.

The phone keeps ringing.

"Mister—you gonna let me get the-danged thing or not? It's probably my date, Hex Loller. Christmas Eve services. He's bound to get suspicious. He knows I'm still here—cleaning up. If I don't answer, he might jest git into his pickup—the one with the shotgun in the cab—and mosey on down."

"Answer it then, sister. No funny stuff."

El Bandito is trying to play it cool but I can see a few drops of perspiration on his forehead.

Hex Loller? That's a laugh. Hex and I haven't said a civil word

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to each other since the night he ditched me for Frazzie Moran during a whistle dance at the senior-citizens center. Frazzie Moran! All of sixty-four, depending on how good her addition is, and black roots in her peroxide-blonde hair. Clumsy as an ox. Couldn't do two steps on the dance floor without knocking herself down. Lord knows what Hex saw in her besides her natural thirty-six and big mascaraed goo-goo eyes and a pension from the County road department.

"Mazie, is that you?"

"Hex—it's about time you checked in on me. Will you be picking me up soon?"

Silence. Then—"What's with this Hex stuff? Hex Loller, you mean? This is Grozinski. Deputy Sheriff Grozinski. Is Lem there? He ain't called in and I need him. We got to put up barricades at the Agua Fria River-crossing down on the lowlands. The forecast is somethin' terrible. Ain't fit for man or dogs outside. —Well? Is Lem there or not?"

The gun is in my ribs. Me, Mazie Bong. All-around good-time gal. Five feet two and one hundred pounds soaking wet—and a thirty-eight gun barrel caressing me to the point of unbelievable distraction. "He ain't here. I think he went over to Clover. Saw him this morning. Yeah—he was on his way to Clover to help make luminarios at St. Andrew's for Christmas Eve services—"

I hung up.

All I could hope for was that Grozinski caught on.

What's a luminario? Say, kiddo, if you don't know, then I guess you ain't a resident of the good old Southwest. A luminario is best described as a few heapfuls of sand in a brown paper bag with a lit-up candle stuck right smack in the middle. Gorgeous. Very romantic-looking. Especially on Christmas Eve, walking hand in hand with your beau down a soft candlelit pathway.

Only we don't have a St. Andrew's Church in Clover.

I'm nervous now, wondering what El Bandito will do next.

My twelve-dollars-a-barrel perfume has long since lost its zing and I'm feeling a bit droopy.

"My windows are down," moans Raphael. "My aching back—"

"Big deal," squeaks Thelma. "All you can think of is that fancy van of yours, and girlie magazines that are ruining your eyeballs. Raphael, ain't you ever gonna amount to anything? Your poor Mamasita has her heart set on you being a brain surgeon or something—"

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Raphael is hopping up and down. "Please—my windows! It's a custom job! The all-lambswool seats are getting soaked! Not to mention my woofers and tweeters—they'll be ruined from the rain!"

El Bandito grins. He sticks out a big hand. "Give me the keys, kid, and make it pronto."

"No, you don't," replies Raphael. He is bug-eyed at the thought of the heister making off with the van. "Three-hundred-dollar set of mag wheels! Two-thousand-five for a five-coat lacquer job Michelangelo would envy! No way you gonna take my van!"

Bop. Just like that. Only one bop is necessary.

Raphael sags from the clunk on the noggin.

I'm on my knees, forgetting the possibility of runs in my pantyhose and an unladylike appearance what with lots of blushing-pink skirt hitched up.

I'm dabbing at Raphael's forehead with a handkerchief. He is moaning. I slap him a few times on his cheeks. He opens his eyes and looks at me real stupid like. "Mazie—I hear bells. What's making my head ring?"

"Lay still, little Tex-Mex. It's only a small cut. Let me stop the blood."

"Blood?" Out he goes like a light. Forget it, Mamasita, Raphael will never be a brain surgeon.

El Bandito makes me empty Raphael's pockets until I come up with the keys to the van. Then Lem Dooley gets into the act.

"You weasel!" he shouts. "I'm gonna have an all-points bulletin out on you! Armed robbery! Assaulting an officer of the law! Assault with intent to kill! On Christmas Eve, too! What kind of an upbringing have you had?"

It's pouring cats and dogs outside. Cars are crawling by ever so slowly, just inching through the water on the highway. Heading for Phoenix—or maybe Tucson and wherever. Ain't saying they're gonna make it though. —On a day like this anyone with an ounce of brains would have stayed in bed.

I'm getting soaked. And resoaked. My hair is a gone mess, slap-dab wet against the sides of my face. My head is pounding. I feel a working gal's migraine coming on.

Lordy, just think—forty years ago when I had all my marbles I was doing a lounge turn in Vegas. Pink tights and lots of ostrich feathers. Rhinestone headpiece. The high rollers used to flip tens and twenties at me. And here I am plugging away at Lulu's, taking

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lip from fat cat Jasper and putting up with the likes of Thelma. Lucky if I get a fifty-cent tip.

Hi, Mazie, they say to me, whatcha doing tonight? Wanna ditch Jasper for good? Take ya to the big time, Mazie—Fresno, Sacramento. A gal like you could learn to handle an eighteen-wheeler in no time at all. You got the smarts, Mazie.

I stop daydreaming.

El Bandito shoves me up against the side of Raphael's van. A lemon-yellow paint job with red and orange tongues of flame on both sides from hood to the rear. Also something in lime-green and white which is supposed to represent fast-flowing rivers and pine trees. And then there's the coiled rattlesnakes and cactus—plus the name *Raphael* painted across the back doors in letters two feet high. The whole mess is what you would call eye-catching.

Ear-catching, also? I can hear someone moaning.

"What the hell? Git out of there!"

El Bandito is very angry and he pulls open the door on the passenger's side. He reaches in and makes with a grabbing motion. Out onto the wet gravel tumbles a terrified man on his hands and knees. His eyes are riveted on the gun and he is whimpering, babbling away in Spanish. He is pointing up at the cab and then clasping both hands together as if in prayer.

"Stop crying, mister, Mazie won't let him hurt you!" I yell.

El Bandito is shaking his head. "I'll be a sunova—" he mutters.

She is beautiful. She's slumped against the seat cushion with her head back. She looks at me and her large brown eyes show the pain that's wracking her body. She's twenty-two—twenty-three the most. She and the man without a doubt are illegals. And the poor child in labor. And Christmas Eve yet.

Ten minutes later, or what seems more like an eternity, I come to inside Lulu's, and this time it's Thelma who's doing the honors trying to revive someone. She is sprinkling ice water from a glass at my face with her fingertips.

My head hurts. I can feel a lump behind my left ear.

"Mazie—you danged fool. You ain't got the brains you were born with. Know what you did—huh? You took a punch at Pistol Pete over there and then grabbed the keys to Raphael's van and tossed them into the cactus and mesquite bushes."

"Thelma—the woman!" I can see her slumped in a booth, her husband patting her head, close to hysteria.

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Thelma stopped splashing water. "She needs a doctor real fast. She's in labor. More pronounced every minute."

El Bandito is gone. Let the air out of the tires on Lem's patrol car and took my car. Lots of luck, you clod. See how far you can get in a 1957 load with two bald tires and a quarter tank of gas. Not to mention a balky transmission and a muffler that drags. Transportation car, maybe. Getaway car, never.

"He yanked the phone wires out," howls Lem Dooley.

Thelma has moved her flab and has managed to untie Jasper.

"Four hundred and twelve dollars," he moans.

"Shet up, you poor excuse for a flapjack tosser!" bellows Thelma, adding, "Count your blessings. We're lucky we're alive. Make yourself useful. Hop over and unlock Lem's cuffs—you'll find the key somewhere in one of the garbage bags under the counter where it was tossed."

"First things first!" I yell at Jasper. "Warm up a batch of water—this little beauty's going to be needing all the help she can get mighty soon!"

I'm over, wiping the poor kid's forehead with a napkin. She's squeezing my hand tight and is plumb scared. Her breathing is heavy and raspy and she's biting her lip in pain.

"There, there, honey—Mazie has things under control. Just you try to relax. Take some deep breaths—that's it, my little dove." The husband, who's named Carlos and who weighs all of one twenty soaking wet, is wringing his hands and chattering away a mile a minute with Raphael. Raphael is patting him on the back sympathetically and handing him a cup of scalding black coffee.

"Sad," says Raphael to me.

"What's sad?"

"They came across the border way down near San Luis over three days ago. What food they had ran out. They lost their suitcase with all their clothes trying to make it across a flooded wash. —Lucky they're alive. Water washed them along for about a quarter of a mile just a bit north of here. They spotted the lights here at the diner and were only able to make it to my van before the lady gave out."

"Yeah, and when this is over, immigration will make them leave," I muttered. My Tex-Mex buddy pats me on the back and gives me a little rub. I like Raphael. He knows how to treat a tired-out old hashslinger.

Raphael is grinning. "But it will all be worth it for them, Mazie."

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"How?" I ask, but I think I know the answer already.

"The little nino will be a U.S. citizen. Imagine picking a place like Lulu's to be born at?"

Raphael is right. Many of our friends south of the border cross over just so the woman can give birth to her child on the good old U.S. of A. soil.

Whaaammm. . . . The lights go out. Everything is pitch-black.

Outside there's a blue flash. A transformer must have blown up. The wind is howling like a thousand banshees. Raphael is making a dash for the back door—not being too careful who he tramples over. "I've got a flashlight in the van," he shouts back at us.

"Someone please find the key to these cuffs and unshackle me," howls Lem. As an afterthought he roars at Raphael to get his flashlight also from the patrol car.

"This is too nerve-wracking—I need a jolt," says Jasper, who is standing over the gas stove waiting for the water to heat up.

"Easy, Juanita," I whisper to the little gal. "Easy does it."

She is crying softly.

"Thelma, drop whatever you're doing and give me a hand!"

"I'm taking a break," she calls out to me. "It's a good thing I made this double malted shake before the electricity cut out."

"Thelma! You drop that malted and help me here or I'll drop you! Raphael, you're back with the flashlights—good. Pull two tables together. Jasper, fetch me about ten or twenty clean towels or napkins—whatever. And move it!"

Eleven-fifteen P.M. The wind is still howling outside. I swear the roof on the diner has lost half its shingles. The rain's pelting down in buckets. Damn it, of all the times I could use a good eighteen-wheeler hacker, not a rig has come down the pike. Roads out—probably lots of flooding around these parts.

Lem is down on his knees behind the counter. "Hold that danged light steady—the key's got to be here someplace."

"Better I empty the garbage bag, eh, sheriff?" asks Raphael.

The floorboards behind the counter are a real mess. Jasper too is on his hands and knees and he's pushing and shoving and picking away at turkey bones and other assorted goodies. At eleven-thirty he finds the key, which makes him an instant hero with Lem.

Hands free now, Lem makes a dash for the door and says something about calling in if he can get through, getting out an all-points

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bulletin on El Bandito, and sending a set of medic wheels spinning toward Lulu's pronto.

Five minutes later, he's back inside, soaking wet and a bit crestfallen.

"I'm not getting a reply. I don't know whether I got through or not. The water's hubcap deep and rushing across the highway like crazy."

Carlos is standing over Juanita and squeezing her hand. He whispers something to her and she manages a faint smile as he plants a kiss on her cheek.

"What did he say?" asks Thelma, who has folded and unfolded the same towel at least a hundred times in the last ten minutes.

Just then Juanita lets out a scream.

"Stand back," I say as calmly as I can. "Let little old Mazie take charge. Raphael, lift the poor child—gently now, under the shoulders. That's good, my Tex-Mex lover boy—and don't tell me you feel faint either because it ain't gonna do you no good. You're gonna help Mazie out."

"What do I know about babies?" asks Raphael, slightly bug-eyed.

"Plenty. Your mama had sixteen and you were the runt of the litter."

"Please, Mazie. No jokes—okay?"

"Jasper, hold that light steady. Lem—do the same with yours. Easy now, my little dove—everything will be all right. It's coming. It's coming. That's right, child—yell your purty head off. We're all friends here—"

Well—imagine me, Mazie Bong, delivering a baby on Christmas Eve—at Lulu's no less! Oh, he's a little lover boy. Here, Mazie's gonna give you a little pattycake. —Just like a man. Listen to him howl.

"It's a boy," says Jasper, starting to do a jig or a fandango or something. "Celebration time—I need a jolt," he says. "Mazie, what about you?"

"Forget it, Jasper. No one touches a drop. Raphael, hang in there, kiddo. I'm gonna cut a piece of napkin here, just so. Thelma, hold the little squawker while I tie off his umbilical cord."

In the distance there's a wailing noise piercing through the wind. There it is again. "Lem, check it out—see what's going on outside, will you?" I say. I'm worried about the little dove. She's bleeding.

"It's an ambulance!" shouts Lem. "Stuck fender deep in water

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outside! I must have gotten through! I must have—*Grozinski, you made it!*" He's out the door and sloshing through the muddy-looking water toward an ambulance and a patrol car.

The medic is wading through the water with a black satchel in his hand. Grozinski is half dragging and half shoving someone. Finally they all make it through the front door—the medic, Grozinski, and Lem Dooley, not to mention a soggy-looking El Bandito, who slumps to the floor and starts blubbering for all he's worth.

"Forget your car, Mazie," says Grozinski to me. "It's totaled. I found this clown cringing on its roof down by the railroad overpass and saw it was your car. Only one like it in the whole danged County. I figured you folks must be having problems—"

Raphael hands Grozinski a towel and Grozinski dries off a bit. "I couldn't reach you guys nohow. Got your money back, though. Something like four hundred and twelve dollars. Say, Mazie, what was all that about Lem going to Clover to make luminarios at St. Andrews? We don't have a church by that name in Clover."

Oh, lordy, that's Grozinski for you. He catches on real fast, he does.

Well, here it is Christmas Day and danged if I haven't shed a tear or two what with the little baby and all. Not to mention the young madonna, Juanita, who wanted her baby to be born here. And there's the medic and Grozinski and Lem Dooley all standing together looking as if they were the three wise men from the East. "She's hemorrhaging," the medic whispers to me. "When did it start?"

"Right after the little one came—"

"Oh, God," he sighs. "We'll never get her back to town in time. Does anyone know her blood type?"

Blood type!

"Blood type?" I ask the frightened Carlos.

Raphael takes over. Finally the husband understands. He nods and repeats it to Raphael over and over. Raphael calls to the medic. "AB negative!"

Thelma is cooing softly to the baby. He is sound asleep in her arms but she continues to cuddle him and rock him.

I look at the medic. "Don't you have any AB negative?" The medic is a young kid in his early twenties—peachfuzz on his face and big blue eyes.

"The hemorrhaging is slowing down a little," he says hopefully.

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Jasper walks up to me, a bottle of bourbon in his hand. "Mazie—"

"What is it, Jasper?"

"I'm AB negative—maybe I can help the little gal."

There he stands. Two days' growth of beard. Messy old apron. Chef's hat back on top of a wild scraggle of grey hair. It's a miracle, him being AB negative.

Well, let Mazie tell you how the best Christmas Day of her life wound up even though I didn't have wheels any more.

Jasper took it—or rather gave it—like a man. Imagine that poor excuse for a cook stretched out on a table alongside little Juanita, tubes, bottle, and everything—and the young medic sweating and Raphael singing Christmas carols. And Lem finally getting through to an Air Evacuation helicopter pilot over at the hospital, who was still on standby helping out poor souls Christmas Eve.

And Jasper making a present of the four hundred and twelve dollars to Carlos and Juanita.

And Carlos and Juanita deciding to name the little one Jasper.

The fly boy came in real neatlike and the eye-searing white searchlight beam picked out a dry spot on high ground behind the diner. Jasper carried his little namesake out to the helicopter. The rain had stopped and the wind had calmed down. The sky was clearing, and danged if there wasn't a bright star in the eastern sky. We all stood and watched the helicopter disappear out over the mesquite and cactus until it disappeared from sight.

From a distance, the beat-up old diner didn't look too bad, after all. Raphael took me by one arm and Jasper the other. Thelma led the way back. We were all singing sort of soft and low. About a town called Bethlehem and a little babe who was born there not so many years ago.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Sergeant Bullock story by

JAMES POWELL

Some college graduate had goofed. Maybe he hadn't taken into account the proximity of the North Magnetic Pole. Whatever the reason, a half-mile-wide gap in coverage existed. By godfrey, mused Bullock, lucky for the Free World those poor saps the Russkis didn't know about this chink in the DEW Line. Otherwise, every giant Skipjack bomber and Red Juggernaut tank in their arsenal would come roaring through Crack of Doom. Bullock crossed his arms on his scarlet tunic, jutted a defiant jaw, and stared resolutely into the gloom beyond the picture window.

"Over my dead body," he murmured. "Over my dead body . . ."

THE DARK ELF MASTER OF CRACK OF DOOM

by JAMES POWELL

In his heart of hearts, Mountie Commissioner MacNaughton admitted to a rush of power whenever he strode out onto the giant map of Canada which dominated the floor of the command bunker snug in concrete in the headquarters basement. But on the evening of December twenty-second he did not swagger as he stepped from Halifax to Quebec City to Montreal. He paused for a moment at Ottawa to rummage with a finger among the stacks of scarlet disks, each bearing the name and serial number of a member of the Force on station there. He found the disk he sought—a slightly off-center one—and strode northward to Hudson Bay. Here, if he were alone, he sometimes paused to dance a little hornpipe. Tonight he did not. He had much on his mind and one solemn duty.

The much on his mind involved the deaths in recent weeks of

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three good friends, the top U.S., British, and Danish Intelligence officers in Canada. Lately, at their get-togethers, MacNaughton had sensed he was being kept in the dark about something, something called Operation Lazy Susan. The winks flying over the ryes and water, the conspiratorial elbows, the sudden snorts of laughter all excluded him. And this was particularly galling because he knew Operation Lazy Susan must have to do with Canada. But of course he expected to be let in on the secret when they'd had their fill of chaffing.

Then suddenly, one after another they'd been murdered. MacNaughton felt strongly that a solution to the murders would lead him to the dark secret the three men had taken with them to the grave. To that end he set down the facts in the three cases in "The Commissioner's Corner," his popular column in *The Scarlet Trumpet*, the Mountie monthly. Perhaps a challenge to his readers would bring results. Perhaps.

MacNaughton's one solemn duty was another matter. He left Hudson Bay behind him and stepped across the Arctic Circle, coming to a stop at a point on the DEW Line, the Distant Early Warning system of radar installations to detect hostile intrusions from across the Pole. Down there at his right shoe was the most important one-man outpost in the Arctic. The Force called it Crack of Doom, though that was not how it appeared on any map.

Bending over, MacNaughton picked up Constable Bart Pitney's scarlet disk. Last night Pitney, a twenty-five-year veteran of the Force, had failed to check in by radio. A plane dispatched from Base discovered the outpost deserted. Clearly, poor eccentric Pitney had fallen prey to the Northern Craves. The Arctic could call like the grave itself to lure a man out on some hell-bent search for a grilled-cheese sandwich, a cribbage partner, a good read of Jane Austen, or whatever it was he craved. MacNaughton shook his head and slipped Pitney's disk into his watch pocket.

The Commissioner's immediate problem was a temporary replacement. Young Oglvy, his wife's nephew, could use some Arctic time, which always looked good on an up-and-coming man's record. But Oglvy was vacationing in Bermuda over the holidays. MacNaughton needed someone who wouldn't be missed down here until he returned. With a nervous little smile, he took the odd-shaped disk he'd removed from the Ottawa pile and set it down on the map.

The Prentice-Jenkins Snow Hedgehog dropped out of a starry late-

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afternoon sky, guided by the bright electric Christmas star atop the outpost flagpole. The constable from the search party who'd stayed behind to take Pitney's place waited with a duffel bag where the plane skied to a stop. The door opened and four pieces of luggage, counting the Mountie hat box, were thrown out onto the snow. They were followed by a large, fur-clad man with a ruddy face and a mustache. He shook hands with the waiting constable, who quickly replaced him inside the Snow Hedgehog. A front was moving in. The plane would have to take off immediately.

The new arrival stood for a few cold, dark, windy moments watching the plane and its lights disappear into the loftier darkness. Then, with two pieces of luggage under each arm, he started toward the outpost. Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock had come to Crack of Doom.

Bullock had heard of Pitney's harmless solitary vice, the collection of Christmas-decoration figures. (He'd even heard talk that the man had started to believe he was Santa Claus.) Still, it was a shock to top the rise and come upon the decorated outpost. A large plastic Santa behind six tiny reindeer waved from the roof. A plastic mob crowded the entranceway: gnomes, elves, reindeer with red noses and reindeer plain, wise men, shepherds, camels, flamingoes, toy soldiers, jacks-in-the-box, caroling angels, caroling choirboys, Pickwickian carolers—all glowing from within like visitors from outer space. All except one. Beneath the star-capped flagpole stood a real snowman—a lean, pathetic thing as snowmen go—wearing a bucket on its head with bottle-cap eyes and a bottle-cap grin.

The outpost door was not locked—they never were in the Arctic. Thieves were few and not unwelcome. No visitors were. And besides, a keyhole was just another something for the snow to blow through.

Bullock set down his luggage on the iron cot, took off his fur mittens, and replaced his fur hat with the broad-brimmed stetson from the hat box. Then, shedding his outerwear as he went, he walked down to the large picture window equipped with defrosters which dominated the seaward wall. This was what Crack of Doom was all about. Some college graduate had goofed. Maybe he hadn't taken into account the proximity of the North Magnetic Pole. Whatever the reason, a half-mile-wide gap in coverage existed.

By godfrey, mused Bullock, lucky for the Free World those poor saps the Russkis didn't know about this chink in the DEW Line. Otherwise, every giant Skipjack bomber and Red Juggernaut tank in their arsenal would come roaring through Crack of Doom. Bullock

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crossed his arms on his scarlet tunic, jutted a defiant jaw, and stared resolutely into the gloom beyond the glass.

"Over my dead body," he murmured. "Over my dead body."

Then it was chow time. Bullock knew there was a chicken and fresh vegetables in the refrigerator. But that was for Christmas Day. The larder held nothing but a large quantity of Grandmother Oglvy's Canned Shepherd's Pies, the scourge of all Mountie outposts. (Commissioner MacNaughton had married an Oglvy.) Well, any port in a storm. As he waited for his supper to heat, Bullock settled down at the small kitchen table, pulled out the current issue of *The Scarlet Trumpet,* and, as he always did, turned at once to "The Commissioner's Corner."

Spellbound, he read and reread MacNaughton's account of the baffling deaths. The English Intelligence officer, his legs blown off as he walked home from the office, had bled to death in a chance thunderstorm before the ambulance arrived. The Dane, whose sportscar was a familiar hazard on the streets of Ottawa, had been killed by a bomb thrown under his speeding car. The tough, wary, and well armed American had allowed himself to be shot down in the street at close range. Each case had its own peculiarities. The Englishman had been killed by a pair of small explosive charges set side by side and three feet apart and rigged to detonate only if jumped on simultaneously. And who could explain the number seven in a square found chalked on the sidewalk beneath the victim's body? And who'd had the hand and eye to roll a bomb under the speeding Dane? And what were the shards of bright green and orange rubber found in the wreckage? And what about the upward trajectory of the bullets that killed the American? It was as if the assassin had popped out of a manhole. But there was no manhole.

Bullock cudgeled his brain until his head ached. When he finally came back to earth he discovered he was on his third cup of tea and halfway through the shepherd's pie. He pushed the food about on his plate a bit before throwing down his knife and fork. By godfrey, you couldn't eat the darn stuff with your mind on it.

Clean-up at the sink left him with a big void where good old Mavis, his wife, should have been. This would be their first Christmas apart since they were married. He knew she'd miss him. But that's the price you pay when you marry a Mountie.

Time to get to work. He took up his position of surveillance in the easy chair facing the picture window. Through the night binoculars,

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he scanned the inlet shoreline, the ice, the frozen sound, and, beyond it, the snow-covered mass of the far shore. Nothing moved in that vast desolation, nothing except the occasional marauding black muzzle of a polar bear.

A wide doggish yawn surprised Bullock. He'd been awake since the wee hours. Then he raised the glasses again. But a moment later he was rubbing his eyes. A large square black shape had suddenly appeared close to the shore. And, as he watched, two small figures with pointed caps emerged from the top, clambered down to the ice, and started in his direction. Then they vanished below the shoreline. Bullock shook his head as if to drive away weariness. He was so tired he was seeing things. A little dose of shut-eye might go down well right now. Bullock unhooked the collar of his tunic and crossed his ankles.

Sleep came quickly for he had a Mountie's clear conscience.

He awoke from the deep sweet nap refreshed but wary, for at first he couldn't remember where he was. Opening his eyes a careful slit, he found himself looking at the top halves of two little faces staring in at him through the picture window, children's faces but strangely careworn, the eyes without innocence or wonder. They wore pointed caps and oddly pointed earmuffs. Bullock closed his eyes, fearing they saw they were observed. When he awoke again an hour later the little faces were gone. The whole thing must have been a dream.

Time to call Base. The voice Bullock raised was young and preoccupied. He reported that Crack of Doom was quiet but admitted with a laugh that he felt he was being watched. "Maybe it's Santa seeing if you've been naughty or nice, Maynard," said Base.

"Wiseacre," said Bullock, turning off the transmitter. But he did do up his collar and straighten his hat. Not because Santa might be watching—Bullock laughed! Santa, indeed!—but because a man mustn't let himself go native in these isolated circumstances. Still, Base's words carried him back to boyhood Christmases in Dawson City. That's when he remembered carrot stew.

Each Christmas Eve in Dawson City every house in town would decorate the snowmen in their yards with pieces of coal for eyes and a grin and a carrot for a nose. The way the story went, poor families would come by night and collect the coal and the carrots, building a fire with one to warm themselves and cook a stew of the other. A carrot stew. (Or nose goulash, as the kids from Eastern European countries called it.) By godfrey, how many times had he fallen asleep

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at the window, hoping to see the poor families coming to collect the coal and carrots?

Then Bullock remembered the pitiful, noseless snowman under the flagpole. For old time's sake, he pulled on his boots, dressed for the weather, and found the longest, most elegant carrot among the fresh vegetables in the refrigerator.

Outside, the wind was up, strong and cold, whipping the snow into windigos—arctic devils, as the Eskimo called them. Teeth chattering, Bullock chipped a hole in the frozen face with his pocket knife. How strange the artificial light made things look. He could swear he saw eyes in dead sockets peering out at him below the bottle caps. When the hole was done, Bullock whittled the broad end of the carrot to fit and screwed it into place. Then he hurried back inside. The front was finally moving in.

As Bullock threw off his parka, he stopped to stroke his jaw. The electric lights out there must be starting to go. He'd swear two of the elves in the display weren't lit up. By godfrey, soft city chores played heck with a Mountie's eyes. It was time to hit the sack.

Bullock awoke thick-headed, grumpy, and late. Outside a blizzard howled. Even getting into his uniform failed to buoy his spirits. Some Christmas Eve! He missed good old Mavis and sitting around with the boys in the Mountie tuck shop listening to the Nelson Eddy carols on the jukebox. Most of all, he wished he wasn't starting to see things like little people. As the tea kettle heated, he strode over to the window, where the snow swirled out of the darkness and then back into it again. He gave the baseboard two resolute kicks, which always cleared up the television set at home. But it didn't work here.

Bullock made his breakfast tea. He toasted his pile of breakfast toast and dug the little stone jar of marmalade out of his luggage. He ate staring out into the storm. Well, there was no getting away from it. When the weather broke, he'd have to go down and investigate that blasted black shape offshore.

By late afternoon the wind had dropped and the snow relented. Deep in his furs, Bullock moved through the gloom out toward the black object on the ice. He was in a better humor now because he had decided to eat his Christmas dinner a day early. Before coming out he had popped the chicken in the oven as per good old Mavis's

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instructions. No man should have to eat canned shepherd's pie two days running.

At first he thought the dark object on the ice was a big iron box or a small iron house. But as he trudged closer, he saw it was the conning tower of a large submarine. By godfrey! thought Bullock, moving closer across the ice with his drawn revolver in his mittened hand. On the side of the conning tower was written CCCP in letters three feet tall. Bullock scratched his head through his fur hat with the muzzle of the revolver and wondered what the initials meant.

"Welcome to Chris Cringle's Children's Project, Maynard," came a deep voice behind him. Bullock jerked around in surprise but saw no one. Then he looked down into the upturned face of a stocky little man no more than three feet tall wearing a pointed hat and pointed earmuffs.

Bullock's eyes narrowed. "All right, who are you?" he demanded, adding in an exasperated voice, "And what the heck's Chris Cringle's Children's Project?"

"Shaver's the name," boomed the man. "I'm one of Santa's little helpers."

Bullock tightened his grip on the revolver and gave a dark, pitying laugh. "There isn't any Santa Claus," he insisted and was surprised to hear his voice break.

"Boy, don't we know it?" nodded Shaver ruefully. Then he gestured to the conning-tower ladder. "Let's get in out of the cold. I'll show you the setup."

"After you, Alphonse," said Bullock cautiously, waving the man up the ladder with his pistol. Then he said, "Hey, how come you knew my name?"

Shaver smiled sweetly down on the Mountie. "Oh, we've got quite a file on you, Maynard. That's what Santa's little helpers are for." Shaver threw a leg over the top of the conning tower. As Bullock followed close behind, the little man banged on the hatch cover on the floor. "We have to keep this locked," he explained. "A polar bear blundered in once and, boy, didn't the fur fly in the toy workshop!"

"You mean . . .?"

Shaver nodded. "Blame it on OPEC, I guess. The North Pole operation cost an arm and a leg to heat. And then the raw materials had to be shipped in. And then the boys had to be shipped out. So we decided to decentralize, you know, with a workshop in every country. And while we were at it, we said to ourselves, why not let

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the ragheads stew in their crude? Why not go atomic? And buying in bulk meant some real bargains on used nuclear submarines."

Here the hatch popped open to reveal the head of another little man with a large nose and large pointed ears. "Maynard's come, Stubbins—I told you he would," said Shaver. Nodding for Bullock to follow down the ample hatchway, Shaver descended the inside ladder. The control room was stacked with boxes.

"The last shipment of toys goes out tonight, Maynard," said Shaver, leading the way down a narrow corridor to two wardrooms. In the left-hand one a dozen elves were putting the finishing touches on a gross of multicolored rubber balls. In the other, more were working over bright plastic reproductions of modern automatic weapons done two-thirds to scale.

"A lot of toy guns," said Bullock disapprovingly.

"Santa's final words were 'Ho, ho, ho—give the tykes what they want, boys.' Right, Stubbins?" said Shaver.

"There isn't any Santa Claus," insisted Bullock. "And there never was."

" 'Never was' sure covers a lot of territory," said Shaver. "I guess you'd have been about seven, Maynard, when Santa tried giving toys that were good for kids. That's when a lot of them stopped believing in him and Santa started wasting away. Soon that big belt-buckle of his was down around his knees, the apples in his cheeks had turned to ashes, and his beard was coming out in handfuls. Santa was a proud old guy. He saw what was happening and knew why. One night he took an overdose of sleeping pills."

"You're saying Santa committed suicide?"

"Between you and me and the lamppost, that was the extent of it, yes," admitted Shaver in a deep, sad voice. "But the organization survived. All over the world, people like your Constable Pitney came forward to stand in for Santa. His recent disappearance left us out on a real Christmas limb. You're the answer to our prayers."

Bullock's mouth went dry. "You want me to be Santa Canada?"

"Oh, listen now, we'd do most of the work—the joe jobs," Shaver assured him. "You'd come down the Governor-General's chimney and leave the presents for the Prime Minister's children and things like that."

"No," said Bullock, shaking his head firmly. "If I was Santa Canada, you guys could take care of the big shots. I'd visit all the poor kids and the ones in hospitals. That's the kind of Santa I'd be."

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Here all the elves threw down their tools and applauded. "You tell them, Maynard!" some elf shouted.

This prompted Bullock to continue. "And you know," he said, "maybe there's another toy we should think of outlawing as dangerous to kids. Balls. Now stay with me while I make my point. As I drove home from work a while back, a ball rolled out into the street ahead of me. Possessing the fine reflexes of a Mountie, I slowed my Skoda Runabout to a stop just as the ball's little owner ran out into the street after it. I . . ." Bullock's tongue stumbled, for suddenly he knew how the Danish Intelligence officer had been slowed down and murdered. And Stubbins knew he knew. The little man snatched up a purple M-16 from a workbench and shoved it into Bullock's stomach.

The Mountie dropped his revolver and eyed the angle of the barrel of Stubbins' weapon. Now he knew how the American had been killed. Bullock reached over and plucked off the top of Stubbins' ear. It was plastic. The little man cursed and ground his teeth.

"Big Nick wouldn't want him killed, Stubbins," said Shaver sharply. He punched a tiny fist into a tiny hand. "Damn it, Maynard, I thought we had you going. It worked with old Pitney. Why not you?"

"So these balls are bombs," said Bullock. "And the American was killed when one of you guys came skipping down the sidewalk in short pants with what looked like a toy M-16. 'How are you today, my little man?' asked the American, leaning over to pat you on the head. That's when he got the bullets at close range, right? But what about the Englishman?"

"You know the type," said Shaver. "The kind who'd shy away from walking on a crack because he didn't want to break his mother's back. And there was something else he couldn't pass up."

"Hopscotch, right?" shouted Bullock. "You laid out hopscotch squares and mined the two side-by-side numbers four and five. And he came hopping along and did the rest."

"Big Nick said they tumbled onto Operation Lazy Susan," Shaver said. "And now it's the guardroom to keep you safe until it's time to tell Base everything's okay. We monitor the frequency, by the by. That's how we got your name."

They started off into the bowels of the submarine with Stubbins in the lead. Shaver brought up the rear with the Mountie's revolver. Bullock looked back over his shoulder and protested, "But I've got a roast chicken in the oven back—"

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With a deep growl, Shaver spun Bullock around and butted him hard in the pit of the stomach with his head. Gasping for breath, Bullock came close to breaking that part of the Mountie code which forbids hitting someone smaller than yourself. Instead he opted to double over in pain.

"Another word, Maynard," whispered the false elf into an ear now conveniently near at hand, "and I'll demonstrate why they call me Shaver." A straight razor appeared in the little man's hand. He waved it under Bullock's nose.

"Trouble?" demanded Stubbins.

"Just showing Maynard who's boss," smiled Shaver. "Come to think of it, we can skip the guardroom. I'm going to take him back to the outpost." He cut the air with his razor. "I just might bleed an official secret or two out of him before Big Nick gets here."

The snow was blowing again as they crossed the ice, guided shoreward by the star atop the flagpole. Bullock went reluctantly. It wasn't so much the torture he feared as his embarrassment when Shaver at last realized he possessed no official secrets.

"Watch out for polar bear," boomed Shaver. "They can't leave our garbage alone, but the indigestion makes them mean." They walked on, eyeing the gloom apprehensively.

When they reached the snowman in front of the outpost, Shaver gestured to it with his chin. "Too bad about Pitney. He gave us a lot of mileage before Stubbins had to gun him down."

"Good godfrey!" said Bullock as the words sank in.

The little man nodded. "We knew Base would come looking. So we decided to douse him with a couple of buckets of water and make us a snowman."

"Blast you people to you-know-where," muttered Bullock through his teeth as he struggled to pull the carrot out of Pitney's face. (No sense adding insult to injury.) But the carrot was frozen solid and fast.

Inside the outpost, the roasting chicken announced itself from the oven, reminding Bullock of happier Christmases. Shaver tossed his razor on the kitchen table. "Let's get the show on the road," he boomed.

"Do your damnedest, then," Bullock defied him. "You won't get any official secrets out of me."

"The bird, the bird!" cried Shaver impatiently, rubbing his hands

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together and sitting down at the place Bullock had laid out for himself at the table. "You almost blew it back there, Maynard," said Shaver. "One chicken's a nice fit for two, but hardly worth the trouble for fifty healthy midgets who've crossed under the Pole on a diet of Babushka Brand Canned Shepherd's Pie. That's what makes the polar bears mean!"

Bullock stuck his head into the oven. The bird was a fine golden brown, and in spite of the circumstances he felt proud bringing it to the table.

"What's to drink?" demanded the little man, insisting on something stronger than tea or diet soda. When Bullock grudgingly produced the bottle of Old Pretender scotch for snakebite from the medicine cabinet, Shaver ordered him to set a place for himself. "You do the honors on the drinks," he said, carving the chicken in a most professional manner with the razor.

Bullock doled out a healthy slug into Shaver's glass and a more modest one in his own. "While we're on the subject," he asked innocently, "who's this guy, Big Nick?"

A dark cloud passed across Shaver's face. "Down the hatch," he ordered, swallowing his drink in a single gulp. He waited for the choking Mountie to refill their glasses before he answered in a half whisper, "Big Nick's the meanest son of a bitch ever to walk the face of the earth. And maybe the smartest. Kid-look-alike spies was Big Nick's brain child. And he was right, kids can get away with murder. Take a for-instance: say you've got to meet a midget colleague but you're under surveillance. Rendezvous in a park petting zoo where adults can't come unless accompanied by a kid.

"Here's another: once I gave this FBI clown the slip by ducking into a schoolyard during recess. In jig time the cops arrived, put the night sticks to him, and carted him away. They don't like bozos in raincoats who hang around school yards."

Laughing, Shaver loaded up his plate with a thigh and a drumstick and gave Bullock a few slices from the breast. Bullock preferred dark meat but didn't raise the issue. "Cheers," ordered Shaver, tapping Bullock's glass with the razor. When he'd downed his drink, Shaver dug into his food and continued his story.

"Our original group got over there disguised as the Smolensky Boys Choir. But that was a one-shot deal. We needed a regular way to smuggle in our people and supplies. Well, as it happened, we spent a lot of time with our ears open, playing on Ottawa street corners with MP's kids and generals' kids. Crack of Doom kept com-

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ing up in conversation. And our people at the Easter Egg Roll on the White House lawn overheard a couple of Marine guards talking about it, too. Big Nick had us look into things and here we are."

Bullock chose this moment to reach for the other thigh. When Shaver growled through greasy lips he took a wing instead.

Shaver said, "Here, this might hand you a laugh. When we first got here, a couple of us dressed up like elves and fed Pitney the same cock-and-bull story we told you. He bought it—dead Santa, submersible toy workshop, and all. Ever since, we've been using Crack of Doom to supply our operations and rotate the boys home for midget R and R. Christmas Eve, we'd dress Pitney up in his Santa rig and slip him a Mickey Finn stirrup-cup with a hallucinogen chaser.

"While he was out cold, the helicopter would arrive from the South with the boys going home and we'd load up. Then we'd lash Pitney to a snowmobile and run him around in the dark for a bit, calling the reindeer by name. Then we'd dump him in bed and pour milk and cookie crumbs down the front of his suit. The next day he'd be happy as a clam, telling everybody what a great trip he'd had. Every year it went smooth as silk. Then two days ago Pitney wandered down to the sub unexpectedly and surprised Stubbins catching a smoke on the conning tower with his ear tips off. So Stubbins had to shoot him. What other choice—?"

Suddenly there arose such a clatter that both ran to the window to see what was the matter. Landing lights on the breast of the new fallen snow gave a luster of midday to the objects below. Then to Bullock's wondering eye did appear a freight helicopter with a door in the rear.

"Oh, lordy, he's early," said Shaver in a trembling bass. "Got anything like a breath mint on you?"

"Mounties don't carry breath mints."

"Then we're in trouble," said Shaver. "He's so mean he won't let anyone have any vices but him. And he likes a hundred percent turnout when he arrives."

The helicopter was quickly surrounded by the submarine midgets, all carrying torches. From the copter's cockpit stepped a figure so thick Bullock knew in a flash it must be Big Nick. His beard it was colored a dishwater gray. His brows curled back in the wickedest way. He had a broad beam and a face rather scowly which shook—if he laughed—because he was jowly.

Then the rear of the helicopter opened, and fifty little men trooped

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down the ramp carrying luggage. With Big Nick leading the way, the torch bearers and the new arrivals marched back toward the submarine. When Bullock turned from the window, Shaver was still hopping around on one unsteady foot, trying to get an overboot on the other.

Big Nick held court in a workshop wardroom. He sat on a large chair surrounded by little people and baskets of bon-voyage fruit hastily purchased by Ottawa's Eastern Bloc embassies, for that very day he had been called back to Russia to personally take charge of the final stage of Operation Lazy Susan. He wore a Santa suit because he worked Christmas seasons at a department store where his tiny operatives could pass on last-minute information.

"Ah, there's my little Shaver," cried the elf master mockingly when Bullock and his midget warder appeared. "Come sit on Big Nick's knee and tell him where the hell you've been hiding yourself."

Sweating fearfully, Shaver worked his way through the crowd of elves and clambered up onto the knee. "Well?" demanded Big Nick. When Shaver hung his head and mumbled, the vile Santa bellowed, "Speak up, man!"

"Questioning the Mountie for secrets," lied Shaver loudly. "He's a tough nut to crack."

Big Nick smiled with dark delight and waved Bullock over affably. "Welcome aboard, Maynard. Stubbins's been telling me about you. Maybe a touch of the Scarlet Goulag will loosen your tongue."

Bullock stiffened. There were stories of a Russian forced-labor camp where captured Mounties worked under the lash in tattered uniforms, constructing the world's largest brick roller-skating rink, near Pskov.

"You won't be lonely, Maynard," said the elf master. "Soon every Mountie in Canada will be carrying a hod right alongside you. Within the year North America will be at my feet."

"Operation Lazy Susan?" asked Bullock casually.

Big Nick howled with laughter and leaped to his feet, sending Shaver crashing to the floor. The evil genius blinked away amused tears and threw a ponderous comradely arm over Bullock's shoulder. "Yes, little brother, yes," he said, leaning his weight on the prisoner. "I've had the equipment for fifteen winterized armored divisions loaded onto the ice of the East Siberian Sea under white tarpaulins. For some time now they've been swinging around the top of the world with the ice drift. When they're opposite Crack of Doom, dor-

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mitory submarines equipped with ice augers will surface with the personnel to man them. North America will awake to Russian tanks in the streets."

"Canada'll go down fighting. Count on that."

"Actually, we don't expect Canada to be much more than a pit stop, Maynard," said Big Nick with mock seriousness. Amused by Bullock's ill-concealed outrage he warmed to his story.

"Once I was a mere underweight instructor at the Moscow School for Spying. Then one day I realized an espionage revolution was about to dawn. Clearly the *Orient Express* didn't stop here any more. The *Orient Express* didn't stop anywhere any more. It was time to redraw the maps of the geography of espionage to conform to the new patterns of traffic and congregation.

"And what was to be the shape of things to come? Clearly, Disneyland and McDonald's restaurants. And today I might have added video-game parlors. All right, then why not create a spy-assassin team of kid-look-alikes? That became the heart of a very successful operation which led us to Crack of Doom and will culminate in Operation Lazy Susan!"

He laughed a laugh so terrible even the false elves turned away to shudder. But the sight of Shaver sitting on the floor made him stop abruptly. "You little bastard," he snarled, prodding the midget with his toe, "you stink like a distillery. You reek of roast chicken. You'll be coming back home with me for a little re-education in share-and-share-alike." He nodded at the fruit baskets. "No healthy treats for you like my other little cohorts. Go guard Maynard here while he loads up the helicopter. And when you're done, bring Pitney's corpse on board. We leave no clues behind."

The boxes though small were heavy, and Bullock could only manage two at a time what with going up and down the ladders. After the tenth trip to the helicopter and up the back-door ramp, Shaver said gloomily, "What the hell, Maynard, let's take a break. Might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb."

Bullock led the way back to the outpost, noting as he did the fishy low-tide odor of polar bear on the evening air. Apparently the creatures had been foraging around for garbage. Inside the outpost, Shaver headed straight for the Old Pretender. He sat down, rested tiny elbow on tiny knee, tiny cheek on tiny palm, and scowled into his large drink.

"Rats, I was counting on being in the streets in my little sailor

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suit, shooting your people in the back when our tanks came through," he mourned.

The germ of a plan had taken shape in Bullock's mind. "Hey," he said, "I've got some Grandma Oglvy's Canned Shepherd's Pies here. How about I leave them out for the darn polar bears? Some heartburn to remember us by."

Shaver poured himself another drink. "Suit yourself," he said without looking up.

Bullock opened the two dozen cans in the larder. He slipped six into each of the side pockets of his fur coat unobserved. He made a stack of the other dozen cans, holding it in place with his chin. When Shaver saw he was ready, he stuffed the whisky bottle in his pocket and followed.

Bullock dumped the dozen stack of cans near Pitney's body. Then they returned to loading the helicopter. On the last trip, when Shaver wasn't watching, Bullock dumped several shepherd's pies from his pockets up front behind the pilot's compartment. He dropped the others one at a time from the loading ramp to Pitney's frozen remains. Shaver was too busy with the whisky to notice.

Carrying Pitney back was a job for two. Shaver took the ankles and Bullock the neck and off they went. They reached the submarine tired and breathless, leaned Pitney against the conning tower at the foot of the ladder, and took another break. Shaver broke out the whisky. Bullock stamped his feet and flogged himself with his arms to keep warm. The easy part of his plan was in motion. The next part would be more difficult.

Shaver took another swallow and then raised the bottle as if to throw it away. But at that moment the conning-tower hatch opened with a pneumatic hiss. The midgets who were to take the helicopter back to civilization came clambering down the ladder with their luggage.

"Rats," muttered Shaver. He stood for some time, drinking, staring ashore, thinking perhaps of the killing treat he would miss. But at last he pitched in to help Bullock get the dead man up the ladder. Bullock dragged Pitney up by a grip on the frozen carrot while Shaver pushed from below. Midway, they heard the whine of the starting helicopter rotors coming to them across the ice.

When they reached the top of the conning tower, Shaver went right back to his bottle. Breathing heavily, Bullock squatted down on his haunches near the bright hole of the open hatch with the upper part of Pitney's corpse resting on its side across his knees.

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Shaver took one last swallow and threw the bottle into the night. As he turned back to Bullock, the Mountie made his move. With one hand on Pitney's nape, he pivoted the corpse, making the frozen carrot a dagger at Shaver's jugular.

"Hand over the revolver," ordered Bullock.

The wide-eyed little man did as he was told. "But you can't stop us," he protested. "The helicopter's already on its way. You can't stop a nuclear submarine with a revolver."

Bullock straightened up and let Pitney's body fall to the deck. " 'Can't' isn't in the Mountie lexicon," he said, though he was beginning to wish it was. Shaver had spotted the weakness in the next part of his plan. Bullock was happy enough to stall for a moment as they watched the helicopter rise up into the black arctic sky, its flying lights atwinkle.

Suddenly the lights veered wildly.

"What the hell!" boomed Shaver.

"The pilot's losing his nerve," said Bullock.

"That smartass Stubbins is doing the flying."

"Imagine the chaos up there with one or more polar bears running amok," suggested Bullock. "Any minute now we'll see some fireworks. Somebody'll start shooting and a stray bullet will hit a case of bombs." Suddenly the helicopter dropped from the sky. Bullock corrected himself quickly, "Or hit Stubbins."

As the machine collided with the ground, its fuel tank went up in a tremendous fireball. A series of explosions followed as the bombs blew up by the boxful and one by one. Both men stood in awe as the blasts decorated the night with fiery blossoms.

From the belly of the submarine, Big Nick shouted quick orders. Then the strident "crash dive" klaxon sounded. Evidently the Russian thought the submarine was under attack. With a pneumatic hiss, the hatch snapped shut. But not completely. Pitney's carrot prevented that. Bullock got his fingers in the crack, but he couldn't pry the hatch open. So he guessed he wasn't going to be able to capture the submarine single-handed after all. Bullock felt the deck beneath him shudder as the submarine came to life. He turned to shout to Shaver to jump clear. But the little man had already escaped into the darkness.

Bullock scrambled down the ladder. He had barely leaped to safety when the conning tower started its slide beneath the ice. Bullock came to attention and saluted as Constable Bart Pitney's remains came back into view. It sure looked like Pitney was going to have

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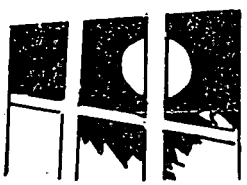
his revenge. Then Bullock exclaimed as the sub dove out of sight, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

Bullock stayed on the ice staring at the dark water until the boiling maelstrom of giant bubbles calmed to a gentle effervescence. Then he trudged back toward the outpost. Time to radio Base.

As he passed the burning remains of the helicopter, something flashed at his feet. Bullock bent over and discovered Shaver's razor and the signs of a bloody struggle. Straightening up, he thought he saw a polar bear hurrying off across the moving lights and shadows on the snow dragging a small body by the nape of the neck. And maybe he did. But, by godfrey, considering the season of the year and all, it wouldn't have taken much to make him believe he'd been mistaken.



DETECTIVERSE

NON-SCENTS VERSE

by VIOLET J. CONOVER

A private detective named Finnegan
Went out of the room and came in again.
When they asked where he went,
He said, "I lost the scent
And had to go back and begin again."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

WRITERS' ORGANIZATIONS: The Horror/Occult Writers League (HOWL) was scheduled to hold its first meeting, appropriately enough, on Halloween. Organized by horror writer Robert McCammon, the new group hopes to benefit authors and readers by offering awards and encouraging publishers to recognize the genre as a category distinct from mystery and science fiction.

In France, the mystery writers' organization "813" (named after the Maurice Leblanc novel of that title) held its annual Mystery Festival in Reims over the same Halloween weekend. Guests of honor were Ruth Rendell from Britain and Bill Pronzini from the United States.

And the recently formed Crime Writers of Canada is considering the presentation of its first awards next year.

PRIVATE-EYE COMICS: Don McGregor, who's had success in the past with adult private-eye stories in comic-book form, has created a new character, Nathaniel Dusk, star of a monthly comic book that goes on sale in November through comic specialty shops. The 24-page full-color magazine contains a continuing story which will run through four issues, detailing a complex, action-filled case for Dusk, a New York private eye in the winter of 1934. It's written by McGregor and illustrated by Gene Colan with an eye toward mood and period detail.

The first issue has a cliffhanger ending on a ledge of the Empire State Building. DC Comics is the publisher and each of the four issues is priced at $1.25. A boxed set will be offered later.

A GUIDE FOR FANS: Help for mystery readers seeking further novels by a favorite author or about a favorite sleuth is provided in a new guide by Jo Ann Wolff. Titled *Whodunit,* the 250-page paperback consists of title lists arranged alphabetically by author. Cross-reference indexes of series characters and pseudonyms are included. The book is designed for fans, and there is no bibliographic information as to publisher, date, price, etc. Cost is $4.50 and details may be obtained from the publisher, Jo Jan

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Enterprises, PO Box 202, Santa Ana, CA 92702.

LITERARY MURDER: Mysteries of Winterthurn, a new novel by Joyce Carol Oates due this winter from Dutton, stars a late-Nineteenth Century detective named Xavier Kilgarvan, who is called upon to solve three separate murder cases in Winterthurn, the place of his birth. This may prove to be the first successful venture of a major literary figure into detective fiction since William Faulkner's *Knight's Gambit* in 1949.

SHERLOCKIAN HERALDRY: A slim volume originally published in 1955, *Practical Handbook of Sherlockian Heraldry* by Julian Wolff, has been reprinted—with a brief 1956 addition—by Magico Magazine, PO Box 156, New York, NY 10002. The 48-page book is available in a softcover edition at $6.50 including postage, and a 100-copy limited hardcover edition, signed by Wolff, at $15.00, postpaid.

MYSTERY WEEKENDS: Mystery fans in the Northeast will want to investigate the Murder Mystery Weekends being held monthly at the Toppersfield country inn and restaurant in New York's Catskill Mountains. Details may be obtained by writing Toppersfield, PO Box 941, Tannersville, NY 12485, or phoning them at 518-589-6048.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: The Library of America, a distinguished series of volumes by notable American authors, is promising one of the most complete editions yet of Edgar Allan Poe's writings. It's due next April in two 1,000-page volumes, including his tales, poems, essays, and criticism.

Jon L. Breen may have departed as EQMM's mystery critic, but he's becoming more active as a mystery writer himself. Walker will publish his second novel, *The Gathering Place,* in January. It's set in a second-hand bookstore.

A new themed anthology edited by Carol-Lynn Rossel Waugh, Martin Harry Greenberg, and Isaac Asimov, *Murder on the Menu,* is due from Avon early next year. It'll feature mysteries (at least one of them never before published) about each course of a meal.

Britain's newest publisher, Zomba Books, is planning several new mystery omnibuses in its Black Box Thriller series, including collections of novels by Fredric Brown, Anthony Boucher, Davis Grubb, and Horace McCoy.

Morrow's eagerly awaited anthology, *The Mystery Hall of Fame,* described in our May column, has been postponed until February.

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"Q"

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

A major American mystery novelist and two distinguished screen actors died within a short span of time recently, and this column cannot allow them to pass from the scene without commenting on their contributions to the mystery film.

Although Ross Macdonald began his writing career in the mid-1940s and first wrote about his somber, introspective private-detective series character Lew Archer in 1949, his work did not reach the movies until nearly two decades later. *The Moving Target,* the first Archer novel, was released in 1966 as *Harper*—because Paul Newman, its star, insisted at that time his screen roles begin with the letter *H*. Despite this name change—Archer becoming Lew Harper, private detective—the movie was otherwise quite faithful to its source, expensively produced with a cast of important stars which included Lauren Bacall, Robert Wagner, Julie Harris, Arthur Hill, and Janet Leigh (as the detective's divorced wife, more prominent in the film than in any of the Macdonald books). Even though it was shot in color in opulent locales, *Harper* had a *noir* feeling to it which was quite impressive.

It was not until 1975 that Paul Newman was to play the detective again, in *The Drowning Pool.* This time the change was geographical, with the locale moved from Southern California to Louisiana. Surprisingly, Ross Macdonald endorsed the shift, stating that a good story can take place anywhere. It was not as successful as the first film. The year before, a version of Macdonald's acclaimed *The Underground Man* was produced as a two-hour television movie, starring Peter Graves as Archer. It missed much of the moody undercurrents of the book in its search for murders present and past. Similarly, a series of six hour-long TV shows called *Archer* featuring Brian Keith in 1975 was far too limited in format to capture much of Macdonald's probing intensity.

Neither the movies nor television has shown any interest in the author in the near decade since. A pity, for Ross Macdonald has left a storehouse of rich drama upon which the mystery screen can draw.

David Niven noted in his autobiographical *The Moon's a Balloon* that he played the juvenile lead in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes play, *The Speckled Band,* while a student at Sandhurst in 1927. He didn't abandon mystery parts thereafter. Early in his Hollywood screen career, he played one of the four sons who avenge their father in John Ford's thriller (with a whodunit ending), *Four Men and a Prayer* (1938), and was the weakling brother in *Wuthering Heights.*

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That same year, 1939, he starred in the remake of *Raffles,* making the master thief far more cheerful than Ronald Colman had a few years before—although, because the Production Code had in the intervening time become more powerful, Niven's punishment at the end is a touch more certain.

Many melodrama roles followed, but in 1963 he returned to a Raffles-type character that was to become virtually a series: Sir Charles Litton, the dashing aristocrat of Blake Edwards' *The Pink Panther,* is actually the sought-after "Phantom," from whom no gem is safe. He reprised Sir Charles in his final film, *Curse of the Pink Panther.* In 1964, he co-produced and was one of the stars of *The Rogues,* a television series about a patrician family of con men. In *Death on the Nile* (1978), he was a Watson-like assistant to Hercule Poirot, and was memorable in a parody of Nick Charles in Neil Simon's *Murder by Death* (1976).

He played Dracula *(Old Dracula)* and James Bond *(Casino Royale),* fought witchcraft in *Eye of the Devil* and spies in several films, but it is David Niven's loveable roguery which will be missed the most.

Raymond Massey's work in mystery films should also not be overlooked. His first important American film (he was born in Canada) was as Sherlock Holmes in the 1931 *Speckled Band;* the following year he was one of the storm-driven visitors to J. B. Priestley's *Old Dark House.* His villains were outstanding, from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to *The Prisoner of Zenda,* and his Karloff-like mad scientist in *Arsenic and Old Lace* was unforgettable.

Fortunately, with all three creative forces saluted in this column, the mystery screen has preserved their achievement. Their work will not soon be lost.

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INTERVIEW: CELIA FREMLIN (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the last issue.

EQMN: Did you enjoy bringing up a family?

FREMLIN: Yes, I loved bringing up my family—one of the most absorbing, varied, and demanding jobs in the world. How anyone can claim that it turns one into a "cabbage" I shall never understand, for the job demands of you every ounce of skill, intelligence, and stamina that you can possibly muster. I don't care if your I.Q. is 150-plus, it will still be stretched to its limit several times a day, coping, improvising, inventing.

With a husband and two or three toddlers, a cabbage wouldn't last five minutes.

EQMN: What was your own childhood like?

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FREMLIN: It was very happy. We lived in the country in an old farmhouse with lots of space, lots of outhouses and barns, lots of books, and a wise and loving mother. I had a brother only a year older than myself and we were inseparable companions. We played endless imaginary games up in the trees and in the fields and barns, and I never remember being bored except on Sundays, when we had to wear our "best" clothes all day, and not rush about or climb or read storybooks. It always seemed an awful waste of a day, especially when the sun was shining.

EQMN: "There are no such things as lies nowadays," Dot says in *The Long Shadow,* "there is only the inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality." A reflection of Dot's character certainly. How do *you* feel about lies?

FREMLIN: This is just Dot trying to be trendy and broad-minded, of course—not a serious contribution to the psychology of lying. I myself feel pretty casual about lies, I think, provided no real treachery or betrayal is involved. *Or* self-deception—that's bad, too. I think, when I tell lies, I know that I'm telling them, and I know why, and would be able to defend my reasons if cross-questioned. —Well, I *think.* But how would I know if I didn't know—if you see what I mean!

EQMN: Any thoughts on the differences between girl and boy children, men and women?

FREMLIN: Pace Women's Lib, I do think girls and boys are very different, from birth, and regardless of how you bring them up. It so happened that in his early days of fatherhood my husband held the then very advanced idea that children of either sex should be treated exactly alike, including being given exactly the same toys—no nonsense about dolls-for-the-girls and train-sets-for-the-boys. In pursuance of this view, he gave our son and our older daughter, then four, a clockwork train each for Christmas. And what happened? Our son played with it as expected—winding it up and racing it round the rails—while our daughter, left to herself, lovingly uncoupled the cars, gave each of them names, and put them to bed in a cardboard box, cozily tucked up with blankets and pillows. —My husband thereafter handsomely admitted defeat and put away his books on child psychology.

EQMN: In *Murderess Ink,* you said women make very good victims, that a woman should definitely be the murderee.

FREMLIN: Yes, I think I did say that women make the best murderees—and the best murderers, too, come to that. When I say "best," I mean most interesting—from the author's point of view. I think women in general are more subtle in the way they go about things, they are more inclined to hide their feelings, to act in accordance with other people's expectations while perhaps seething inside. Their motivations are liable to be devious and secret, maybe quite out of character from the point of view of the outside observer, but all the more fascinating for the author who is studying

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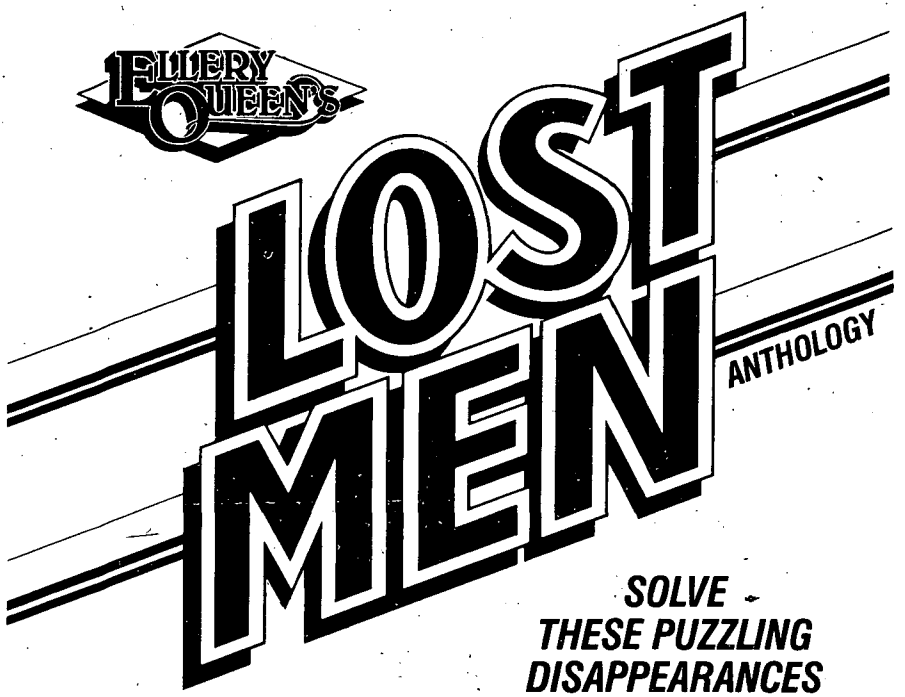
THE SEARCH IS ON... 21 MISSING MEN IN



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them in depth. —I'm not saying men *can't* be like this—they can—but I'd say that, in general, men are more open in their demands on life, less ashamed of asking for what they want and getting it.

For these sort of reasons, my early books *always* had female protagonists, but I'm branching out a bit now, and in two of my recent books—*The Spider Orchid* and *The Parasite Person*—I've experimented with a masculine main character and have found it unexpectedly rewarding. It's somehow very liberating to write from the point of view of a sex other than your own. I find in particular that it frees me from that slight, continuous gravitational pull towards making my heroine too much like myself. With a man as a main character, this can't happen, he is free to be absolutely himself, without reference to *my* self-image. I find this a big and unexpected bonus, and I shall probably have quite a lot of male protagonists—and/or victims—in the future.

THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

In no kind of writing does the series character, or recurring protagonist, flourish more than in mystery fiction. Over 3,000 such characters have appeared in book form, and uncounted hundreds more in magazine tales.

Some series are very long, with popularity extending over decades, others much shorter and yet exquisitely enjoyable. Of the long ones, "house" series by multiple authors—the Nick Carter, Sexton Blake, and Doc Savage stories—lead in number of appearances. But at least nine series by single authors have appeared in 60 or more volumes: Perry Mason tales by Erle Stanley Gardner (85 books), Inspector Maigret by Georges Simenon (73), Dr. Priestley by John Rhode (72), Ludovic Travers by Christopher Bush (63), Dame Beatrice Bradley by Gladys Mitchell (61), Desmond Merrion by Miles Burton (61), Richard Rolleson (The Toff) by John Creasey (61), Fleming Stone by Carolyn Wells (61), and Peter Clancy by Lee Thayer (60).

In 1983 mystery and detective series continue alive and well. Consider . . .

Simon Brett has been actor, director, producer, and script writer for radio and TV. He invests his Charles Paris stories, of which *Murder in the Title* (Scribners, $11.95) is the ninth, with a fine sardonic sense of theater. Paris's career has been on the decline: he's now reduced to playing the corpse in a tacky thriller in a shabby rural theater. Developers have their

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beady eyes on the theater; its management must tread carefully to keep public favor and avoid the bulldozers. Despite this, the thriller is to be followed by a drama consisting largely of nudity (Paris is to have a brief exposure in this) and four-letter words. Outraged citizenry descends. Something is awry, as a pair of murder attempts serves to emphasize. Comes then a corpse, and Paris assumes his accustomed role of accidental sleuth.

"Frank Parrish" writes thrillers under another pseudonym and primarily mainstream novels under his own name, but perhaps his finest achievements are the Dan Mallet novels, of which *Bait on the Hook* (Dodd Mead, $10.95) is the fourth. Mallet left bank clerking for the trade of his father, poaching. That and related indiscretions here bring Dan to the top of the wanted list, for murder. No one would believe his story (he's not sure he believes it himself), so he tours rural England hunting the real killer, guided (no, more led by the nose) by a precocious nine-year-old girl. The setting is delightfully rendered, but most enjoyable of all is the relationship that develops between Dan and the girl.

The fortunes of Inspector Alf Rosher—unaffectionately known as Old Blubbergut—are somewhat on the rise. In his latest appearance, *The Local Lads* by Jack S. Scott (Dutton, $12.95), Rosher has regained his rank. But an airplane crackup lands O.B. in the hospital with a plastered leg in the air. While thus immobilized, he manages to tie the can to a local businessman who engineered a major heist, then drove into a truck and ended in the ward next to Alf. Witty, slangy, sardonic, pleasurable.

Thirty-four novels in 34 years—that's the count on Dell Shannon's police-procedural series about Lieutenant Luis Mendoza. The 34th is *Exploit of Death* (Morrow, $11.95), which has a nice central puzzle. Mendoza and wife, returning to L.A. from vacation, meet a French girl traveling to meet her grandfather for the first time. A week later she's dead, an apparent suicide, under a different name and with folks ready to supply a pedigree having nothing to do with France or grandfathers. For the rest of the novel a superabundance of unrelated cases and corpses subtitute for plotting, but the French girl affair is worth waiting out.

Janwillem van de Wetering's Amsterdam policemen (Grijpstra, de Gier, and the Commissaris) return for the 9th time in *The Streetbird* (Putnam, $13.95). More and more, this series reminds me of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, especially in the rich use of humorous irony in dialogue and description. In *Streetbird* the city's leading pimp is killed, a cause for some rejoicing. Somewhere among the rejoicers must be a killer. Grijpstra and de Gier set out after him in their own oblique fashion, while the Commissaris goes underground to hunt. This is a fine novel, abounding in well caught characters and requiring attentive reading.

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A series newer but already of impressive stature is Martha Grimes's about Superintendent Richard Jury. Grimes is an American—Professor of English in Maryland—but her novels are securely, if sometimes a bit mockingly, set in England. The third Jury tale is *The Anodyne Necklace* (Little Brown, $14.95). Littlebourne is a tranquil village not far from London. At least it was. Grimes adds an impossible peer, a mugged teenager in a coma, a downpour of anonymous letters. Finally, unforgiveably, a corpse disturbs prime birdwatching territory. Enough! Enter Jury. Prime quality.

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"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

EX LIBRIS

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A librarian who secretly took
Priceless volumes from out of their nook
Was not even suspected
When the crime was detected,
For she'd done all her thefts by the book.

A STRIKING DECISION

Said a burglar, without reticence,
"I do not get enough recompense.
So in order to show
That I'm hard up for dough
I've decided to picket my fence."

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a distinguished reprint by

DELL SHANNON

Dell Shannon is one of four pseudonyms of the prolific and popular Elizabeth Linington. In the Introduction he wrote for one of her omnibuses, More by Shannon, *published by the Mystery Guild, her literary agent Barthold Fles wrote: "When Joan Kahn, the doyenne of mystery editors, bought her first detective story,* Case Pending, *in 1959, Elizabeth Linington had already published five historical novels . . . At the time, the public seemed to have a prejudice against female writers of detective stories, and so Dell, which could be either male or female, was selected as the given name of the pseudonym, with Shannon as the family name, being a river in Ireland, a country which Miss Linington loves . . ."*

There are now 34 novels in the series about Police Lieutenant Luis Mendoza that began with Case Pending*—as well as some 35 others written under her own name or as by Lesley Egan, Egan O'Neill, or Anne Blaisdell. But there have been only two short stories by Miss Linington. The one following appeared in one of the Mystery Writers of America's most successful anthologies,* Tales for a Rainy Night *(1961), edited by David Alexander. Since it was written over twenty years ago, you will notice that certain items mentioned in the story no longer exist and that financial costs were considerably lower. The emotional cost of ten-year-old Michael Garvan's predicament, however, couldn't be greater . . .*

"Q"

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FLASH ATTACHMENT

by DELL SHANNON

Michael Garvan sat by the window in his room, looking out. Nothing much to see but grass in the side yard and the house next door. The bushes were blowing in the wind and it looked as if it might rain any second.

He heard the man walking around in the living room again. He'd sit smoking one cigarette after another, the man named Sammy, and then get up and walk round and round. Mike didn't like him much.

Nothing to do, even if he could go out. The doctor'd said, better not let him out in this cold for another couple of days. She hadn't got the doctor until he said maybe she ought to, he felt so terrible, and then there was a fuss and poor baby, where does it hurt? And the doctor said measles and gave him shots. It had been pretty awful while it lasted, because, of course, like always she said Darling and Honey but she was out a lot and didn't think about getting him things to eat or clean pajamas and so on when she *was* home, but that was just Mother. He'd managed somehow, getting stuff for himself, and now he was O.K., all the spots gone and everything, except he still felt kind of funny if he stood up too long and like that.

Nothing to do much, inside or out. They'd only been in California a month, and it was Christmas-vacation time now, and he hadn't got to know any other kids at school here yet. There was a kid he'd seen on this block, looked about ten, just like Mike, but he hadn't got to know him before he began feeling bad with the measles.

The man called Sammy was still walking around in there. Mike didn't like him, but he didn't like a lot of people Mother brought home; that wasn't anything new. Mother, he thought, just didn't have very much sense about people. He supposed it was maybe on account of the stuff she drank all the time. They used to have arguments about it, her and Dad.

There. It had happened. Thinking about Dad again. He tried hard not to, because it wasn't any good. That judge, something about a

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thing called custody, and Dad so awful mad, and another man—a lawyer, Dad's lawyer—saying swear words about damn sentimental judges putting what he called Pure Womanhood on pedestals. Dad saying, "You write letters to me, Mike, and I'll write to you, see? We won't lose touch. I'll be working on this, kid, don't you worry. We'll be seeing each other."

Oh, he *hadn't* meant to think about Dad! Mike shut his eyes tight against shameful hot tears. He wasn't a baby, he knew why and how it was. It was the money. The money she got from Dad, for him, the support money. Sure, she said Baby and Honey and she kissed and hugged him sometimes, if mostly she did forget all about the laundry or getting stuff to eat at the market and like that. That was how Mother *was*. She wasn't mean or anything like that. You just couldn't count on her about anything. She liked playing cards and going to parties or anywhere with a lot of people, and the stuff in bottles that made her act silly and giggly, like a real little girl. So when you looked there wasn't any bread or peanut butter or milk, but if she was there and not gone someplace she'd say, "Oh, honey, it isn't there—I'm sorry, you go 'n' get some," and give him the money. Mother was fine, if you just knew how she was and expected it.

Sammy'd sat down again. No, he was coming in here. Mike didn't turn from the window, because he didn't want Sammy to see he'd been crying. Besides, he knew what Sammy looked like. A tall, thin man with black hair that looked like he used shoepolish on it, and little black eyes, and a long nose.

"Look, kid," said Sammy, "you want to go to a nice movie tonight? There's a western on down the block. I give you the money."

"Thank you," said Mike, polite, "but I'm not s'posed to go out." He didn't want to, much. It wasn't much fun going to a movie alone. Nobody to talk with about it, after. And he didn't know any kids here.

Sammy said a swear word in a funny kind of whisper and went away.

Mike got the handkerchief out of his pajama pocket and blew his nose and wiped his eyes. He hadn't *meant* to think about Dad. It just wasn't any good.

Write to me, Dad had said. He had, and that was the only time he ever remembered Mother getting real mad. Kept asking him what he'd *wrote,* when he got Dad's letter back. And next thing, they'd come clear out here to California where they didn't know

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anybody, and she said they had a different name here, Robertson, that was her name before she married Dad. He wasn't a *baby;* he knew why he had to be Mike Robertson here. Something about the judge and what laws said. And the money—the money she got for him from Dad. In case Dad could maybe get that judge to say different.

It just wasn't any good thinking about it. Quick, think of something else.

Sammy was walking around again. Living room, kitchen, hall; only not in Mother's room, where the door was shut.

There would be something to do if he had the flash attachment. He sure did want that flash attachment, and when the money came next month he was going to ask her for it. If he caught her just the right minute, when she was feeling good—that silly, giggling way she got—she'd likely say, "Why, sure, honey, you can have it," and give him the money. Fifteen dollars it was, for the whole thing; the one that fitted his Kodak. He could take anything, anywhere, then—inside, practically in the dark. It was lucky he just had the little Kodak reflex—the attachment for a Leica or Rollei cost a lot more.

Dad didn't like a reflex.

There he was, back at Dad again.

Mike went over and lay down on the bed. No *good.* Dad was a long ways off in New York—unless he was away on a special assignment somewhere.

Mike's dad took better pictures than any other pro photographer—news pictures and other kinds. He got prizes for it. He didn't like a reflex camera on account of the square negative—he said it didn't lend itself to good composition. He used the Graphic mostly. A great big camera, it was awful heavy, but he was strong, so he lifted it easy, even way over his head sometimes to get a special picture. And he never let anybody develop his negatives, he always did it himself. But he had said about the Kodak, it's a good little baby to start on.

It had been for Mike's eighth birthday present.

Mike figured Dad had meant to give him the flash attachment for his birthday last year. Because he'd said Mike was coming along. "That's a pretty damn good shot of the bridge! I guess you've inherited an eye for composition, boy!" Only, of course, last birthday had been after the judge and the custody, and Dad hadn't known where to send it. Otherwise he would've.

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Well, Mike guessed maybe it was just that he was more like Dad—looks, and every other way. Mother meant O.K., but you couldn't count on her at all. He just couldn't see why she couldn't remember they were out of milk or that he hadn't clean shorts to put on, or like that. He guessed ladies didn't wear shorts and she just never thought, although she washed out her stockings every night and hung them on the shower thing.

The clock said almost six. He wasn't awfully hungry, but it was time for dinner. Maybe if there was any peanut butter. . . The doctor had said something about beef bouillon. Mike wondered what it tasted like.

You were supposed to have dinner about now.

He got up slowly and went out to the kitchen. He had to go past Mother's bedroom, and it looked funny with the door shut. She never did. It was Sammy shut the door for some reason.

There wasn't any peanut butter, and the bread felt hard. Sammy heard him and came in. "What the hell," he said, and then, "Oh, you hungry? Look, you take this, go out 'n' get something, huh?" He offered Mike a dollar. "A hamburger or something and. . ."

"I'm not supposed to go out," said Mike.

Sammy got a funny look and said a swear word, but then he said, "Sure, that's right. But, see, I fix you a good supper, kid, and doctors don't know everything, you'll feel fine after supper and go see that western. You like westerns? Sure, all kids like westerns." He laughed, but he kept looking like he wanted to say swear words.

Mike sure hoped Mother'd come home pretty soon. Of course, you never knew what Mother would do. But she'd never done a thing like this before, just go off and leave him with a man like Sammy.

He'd seen Sammy before, of course. A couple of times Sammy'd come home with her and other people. They'd played cards or just sat talking and drinking stuff. She called Sammy Darling, but she called a lot of people Darling.

They didn't really know anybody here, just a month. She always got to know people easy, but it wasn't like people you'd known a long while.

She didn't have an awful lot of sense about people.

Mike wondered anxiously just where she'd gone. It was *like* Mother in a way to just pick up and go off. He could kind of imagine her saying to Sammy, "You look after my li'l honey bug a couple of days, see he's O.K. I'll be back Tuesday"—or whenever it'd be. That was

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Mother, though she'd never done it before. But was it anything to do with the judge and the thing called custody? Had she found out about the Letter?

For the hundredth time, Mike told himself she couldn't have. If she had, she'd have set to at him the way she did before—about what had he written and so on.

He'd thought a long time about the Letter before he'd written it. Because it kind of scared him to find how *dim* Dad was getting in his mind, that was it. He had to think to figure up how long it'd been: the judge and the custody thing and Dad looking so mad but trying to pretend everything was O.K., and saying about letters. Just before his ninth birthday, and he'd been ten last month. The thing was, if he wrote letters, then Dad knew where to write, and so right off as soon as she knew that, they moved somewhere. Mike didn't like moving around like that. The only time she was ever cross was when he wrote to Dad.

She hadn't remembered his birthday. She wouldn't remember about Christmas either, likely. You couldn't expect Mother to.

That was how come Mike had first understood. Because he knew Dad had remembered. It wasn't a thing he had to wonder about; he just knew. And there hadn't been a present in the mail or anything. So Mike knew she hadn't let Dad know where they were. Maybe the money got paid to a bank or a lawyer or something; anyway she got it without Dad knowing just where.

And now he'd written another Letter, and probably it'd all happen again just like before, her being cross and them moving.

Dad would have sent a birthday present. That wasn't a thing you had to worry about.

It was funny where she could have gone, though, if she didn't know about the Letter—and she didn't or she'd have said something.

He'd remembered Dad saying once, a long while ago, about the *Tribune,* a picture he'd sold to the *Tribune.* He didn't know where else to send a letter to Dad, now, so he'd sent it there. Somebody there sure would know who John J. Garvan was, and see he got it.

He hadn't said anything bad about her in the Letter. He hadn't really said anything about her at all. Just, he'd like to see Dad again, and couldn't he come stay with him instead, if Dad got the judge to say it was O.K., and about the picture he'd taken of the swans on a lake there was here, and it was pretty good, even if the drugstore had developed it.

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Someday he'd have a darkroom of his own, do it *all*. Dad had let him watch and help sometimes, at home. Before there had been the judge and the custody thing.

And anyway, even if she knew about the Letter (it'd be just about getting to New York now, he figured, he'd only had a four-cent stamp and that was last week), why'd she want to go off somewhere about it?

Sammy fixed fried eggs, and he tried to act friendly and, well, kind of like a kid, making up to Mike. You could tell it was put on. He kept talking about that western at the movie down the street.

Mike didn't like Sammy much.

It *was* funny, Mother acting that way. You couldn't count on her, but she'd never done a thing like that before.

Eating Sammy's eggs, Mike thought about it. Thursday, it had been, and this was Saturday. Thursday night really, because he'd heard her come home then. He'd taken his bath and noticed the soap was awful thin, so they'd need some more pretty soon, and he'd gone to bed and then they'd come home, her and this Sammy. And a while later, he'd heard them in her bedroom, having a fight, kind of. Swear words, and thumps, and thrashing around. Well, Mother had fights like that with a lot of people, and next minute she was calling them *Darling* again.

She'd gone away somewhere that night. Because next morning there was Sammy, looking awful funny and surprised at Mike, when he came out of his room, and saying, "Uh—your ma, she went off on a little trip an' left me to look after you, kid. Just a day or so. Can you get your own breakfast?" (As if he was a *baby!*)

It couldn't be anything to do with the Letter to Dad. But Mike wondered where she'd gone. You never knew what Mother'd do, of course.

Her bedroom door shut looked funny. She never *did,* even when she was undressing. Mother was awful pretty, all white and soft and smooth, with her pretty blonde hair—she didn't mind you looking at her. Dad had been mad at her, but she never meant anything bad, Mother; you just had to know what she was *like* and come to know you couldn't *count on her.* Mother was O.K., you just had to know her.

She never remembered to get peanut butter or milk or send his pajamas and shorts and shirts to the laundry, but Mike felt kind of homesick for her just then (Mother saying *Darling* and *Honey*), and

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he put his hand on the doorknob of her room, on the way back to his own.

"Get *out!*" said Sammy viciously behind him. "What the hell you after? Listen, you little—!" And then pretending to be friendly again. "Look, kid—what's your name? Oh, Mike, that's right, sure. Look, Mikie, here's a buck. You go down 'n' see that western, huh?"

"Thank you, I'm not s'posed to go out," said Mike politely.

Back in his room, he got out the Kodak and thought about that flash attachment. It'd sure be swell to have.

There was Sammy walking around again.

All of a sudden, Mike began to get an awful funny feeling. Not the kind of *soppy* funny feeling about Dad and the Christmas lights downtown and her being gone when he got home from school. A *real* funny feeling, and new. About Sammy, and Mother going off.

It was like handling the Kodak sort of made him think straighter. He hadn't felt much like taking pictures lately, even before the measles, and today was the first day he'd felt really a lot better, like he was all well again.

Yesterday, what about yesterday? He'd had the last of the cereal for breakfast and the last of the milk. He'd laid in bed again, looking at magazines, not very interested—Sammy walking or smoking out there in the living room. Yesterday was Friday. Thursday night she had gone away somewhere.

Sammy said.

He still hadn't felt so good yesterday. All of a sudden, it seemed to Mike like he hadn't paid *notice* to Sammy much, like he deserved. In a kind of way.

You take one of the kids he'd known back home, Danny Foster or somebody like that. He'd sure think it was awful funny, all of a sudden finding his mother gone and a man he didn't hardly know there instead. It *was* sort of funny, but of course Mother wasn't like most other mothers were, Danny's or anybody's. You could always expect Mother to do funny things. And all of a sudden, too.

All the same, though, all the same . . .

Those little tablets in the bathroom she took sometimes for a headache and to make her sleep. He couldn't get to sleep last night, and he remembered them, and got up to look for them. It was like he was really remembering it for the first time, the right way round like. Sammy looking funny, almost scared, in the sudden bright light, saying, "What the *hell!* What are you after? Go back to bed!"

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It must have been awful late, but Sammy hadn't got undressed.. Maybe he hadn't brought any pajamas with him.

And a while after that, Mike got up to go to the bathroom, and there was a light in Mother's room, and Sammy came out quick, switching off the light and saying, "What the hell," again and didn't Mike ever stay in bed all night.

A lot of people Mother knew acted funny in all sorts of ways, of course. It was just that for a minute there Mike saw how *awful* funny it would look to somebody like Danny Foster, and there was a queer hollow feeling in his stomach.

It was a funnier thing than had ever happened before.

Mike sat by the window with the Kodak in his hands, hoping the queer feeling would go away. Almost like being scared of something.

But there was nothing to be scared of. Tomorrow or next day Mother'd come back from where she was and Sammy'd go away. Everything'd be just like usual, except that by now Dad might have the Letter and know where they were. He might even come, if he hadn't an important assignment somewhere. Maybe a judge out here would say different about the custody thing. Anyway, there was no reason to feel all funny and hollow inside like this right now.

It was getting dark outside—quick, the way it did out here. One minute it was light, and then all of a sudden dark.

Like Mother. One minute (come to think of it that way) there in the next room talking up sharp to Sammy, and next minute gone off somewhere.

It was funny, too, living in a little house (thought Mike desperately, trying to think of just ordinary things and stop the funny feeling), a house with a yard instead of an apartment.

It was nearly all dark outside now. He ought to put on the light.

Sammy put on the light. He said, "Listen, kid, whyn't you go see that movie?"

Mike turned reluctantly to look at him. Sammy stood in the doorway, the light shining on his oiled black hair, on the sweat on his white face.

"I don't guess I want to," said Mike.

"Damn it," said Sammy, "get up, go out 'n' *play* like any kid! Go *somewheres!* I—it ain't *natural,* sit round alla time. A kid . . ."

"I've been kind of sick. The doctor said I'd better not go out."

Sammy wanted him to go out somewhere real bad. The movie, anywhere. Mike started to wonder why.

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Because, now he thought about it straight, he could see Sammy'd tried to make him go somewhere last night, too—the movie, the drugstore for a soda, somewhere.

He was saying swear words over and over now, like he hardly knew he was saying them. The way he looked at Mike, standing there, made the hollow-stomach feeling worse, some way. Like he was blind, the little black eyes staring, blank.

"Look," he said. "Look." It didn't mean anything. He came over and laid a hand on Mike's shoulder, a bony, hard hand. Mike sat very still. "Kid, look, you do me a favor 'n' go out somewheres a couple hours. I got a fellow comin' to see me talk over some private business, see? That's all. You get dressed 'n' go take in that movie."

Slowly Mike got up, and the hand fell away from him. He put the Kodak down and took off his pajama jacket.

Sammy looked relieved, and stepped back away. "That's right," he said. "That's right. I give you the dough." And then his eyes went blank again, and now he *was* scared about something. It was queer. Mike didn't ever remember seeing a grown up look plain scared before. "But you *seen* me," said Sammy in a whisper. "I shoulda thought. Jesus, I ain't thinking straight. . . Listen, kid. Listen. I never *meant* to do it. I . . . What the hell'm I goin' to do about you? Oh, damn it. . ." And then he turned and went out into the living room.

Mike put on his shorts and undershirt, the last clean pair he had. He felt a lot better in one way, *steadier* sort of, but another way he was scared, too.

There was something wrong about it, about Sammy. If he hadn't still been feeling sick yesterday and not paying notice, he'd have seen it before. Mother, she might do most anything, but if she was going away somewhere, she'd have said so to him, said about Sammy staying.

Just like a baby, like a little kid with no sense, he'd believed what Sammy said. Hadn't *thought* about it.

But now he was. The way Sammy acted a minute ago and what he said. Mike was thinking about it hard and cold.

Sammy wanted him to go away, out of the house. Ever since he was there, Thursday night, he'd wanted Mike to go away. No, only at night. He hadn't tried to get him to go to the movie yesterday afternoon—only at night, last night and tonight. There was something bad Sammy wanted to do, in the dark, here. He'd somehow got Mother to go away, or—Mike's stomach lurched as he reached

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for his best brown pants in the closet—*had he?* Maybe Sammy had Mother all tied up and gagged in the bedroom, like burglars in stories, and that was why he had the door shut.

A *burglar?* But she'd spent most of this month's money, he knew. He remembered her saying it just the other day, "Oh, damn, only the seventeenth and I only got twelve dollars left. I don't know where it goes. . . ."

Well, there was the diamond ring she always wore. And her pretty soft fur coat. Anyway, *something* Sammy was after. The way he acted.

And the bedroom door shut.

Mike had forgotten all about the Letter, and the lonely feeling he had way out here so far from where Dad was and all. He just thought about Mother, who hadn't any sense about people, so she'd taken up with Sammy; and about Sammy, and why Sammy might want him away somewhere for a while.

A real *gangster* maybe. Mother—maybe right *here* all the time, tied up like they did?

Dad said about not losing your head. Keep sensible, think what's the sensible thing to do.

Mike put on the shirt he'd worn three days already, before he had the measles, but it was the only one he had *to* put on, and the brown jacket over it. He thought of a thing, an idea. He thought of a couple of ideas. He didn't know if Dad would think it was sensible, but it was all he could think of right then.

Sammy didn't know much about kids. He looked like he thought somebody ten years old was just a *baby,* didn't know anything hardly. And Sammy wanted him out of the way awful bad. As soon as Mike was out of his way, and it being dark now, he'd go on and do whatever bad thing he'd come to do. And run away. And there'd be no way to catch him, unless. . .

Mike felt his heart pounding and pounding away under the brown jacket. But it was the only thing he could think of. And there was Mother.

He picked up the Kodak and went out to the living room. Sammy was sitting there smoking. He jumped up and gave Mike a big nervous-looking smile. It was cold—he hadn't turned on the wall heater houses had out here—but he was still sweating. "You going out?" he said. "That's swell. That's right. You go to that movie, huh? I'll give you the dough. . ."

"No, sir," said Mike. He tried to make his voice sound like always,

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but it didn't; it sounded funny and squeaky, but Sammy didn't seem to notice. "I thought I'd like maybe to go down and get my Christmas present. Mother said I could have it for Christmas, and I could pick it out myself, account of I know what kind to get. The flash attachment for my camera. She said I could have it even if it's fifteen dollars. She did—did she leave the money with you, maybe? She *said* I could get it. For Christmas. It was all I asked for. It's almost Christmas—day after tomorrow—and she said. . ."

"Oh," said Sammy. He probably didn't even know what a flash attachment was. "Fifteen bucks. Gee, that's a lot just for a kid. . ." But he wasn't really thinking about the fifteen dollars—he was thinking of Mike being out of the way. Mike felt his heart pounding like one of those drills they used on the street. Sammy was reaching into his pocket. "Sure she did, kid. She left it for you. Here you are." Three five-dollar bills.

"Thank you very much," said Mike. His heart seemed to have got up into his throat somehow now, pounding and pounding. It was like he kept hearing Dad's deep calm voice saying about not losing your head whatever happened.

You could say it was all Mother's fault, because she hadn't any sense about people, but all the same she was Mother. Even if she forgot things and lost things and got silly and giggly from the stuff in the bottles.

"I—I guess I'll go to the bathroom again before I go," said Mike. Just, he had to *know*. For sure. On account of it *was* Mother.

He went into the hall and opened the bathroom door, making it noisy. He took two steps and, very careful, very quiet, he eased open Mother's bedroom door. The bathroom light was on, he wouldn't have to turn on the bedroom light.

It was like somebody hitting him, hard and hurting. Time didn't mean anything any more, he didn't know anything else just a minute—only Sammy, the flash, and Dad saying *sensible*. . . And then somehow he was in the bathroom, leaning against the tub, pushing down the toilet flush.

Everything was just nightmare, but you had to *try*.

The feeling was kind of like four-five-six days ago when he'd been real bad with the measles and her not home, and he'd got up to get a glass of water. Like he'd fall down any minute. He'd hung onto the bureau and the door and the icebox and been O.K., but it was a funny feeling. Only now he mustn't hang onto anything. He had to look just like usual. . .

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He got back down the hall and across the living room. He didn't look at Sammy at all, wherever he was. He just went out into the cold black night, and he began to run. He ran toward the main street, a block up, the lights and people and noise, and he kept his free hand curled tight around the money in his pocket.

"Th–that one," he said. "For the Kodak reflex. And a—a six-twenty film."

The clerk looked at him. "That comes to fifteen sixty-five, son. You got the cash?"

"Yes, sir. Right here." It was lucky he had some change left from last week's lunches at school. He'd forgot about the tax on it. "I—I—please give it to me." He had to hurry.

"O.K. Take it easy, you'll get it—so long as it's cash." The clerk had to write in a book. It took a long time, and Mike stood there, shaking all over inside himself. Not thinking about anything, not daring to think, just *waiting*.

But they gave it to him in the end, all wrapped up in brown paper.

He got out of the store, crowded with people shopping for Christmas, the music all over from loudspeakers. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Out in the dark, up the side street.

He sat down on the curb, tore off the brown paper, and loaded the camera. You could do that easy by feel. Under a street light, careful, he turned the neg up to where it said 1 and screwed the thread of the cord into the synchro-flash hole in the Kodak's side.

Sammy thought he was just a baby, didn't know anything.

The flash bulb didn't want to go in straight, but he finally persuaded it. He got up and walked on up the block toward the house. Most of the houses were dark or dim-lighted. He came to the one he was just learning to call home—not really home, just where you lived now.

He didn't go in. He went around the side, very careful and quiet, to the back yard. There was grass, he knew, a tree, flowers.

It was like something was telling him what to do. Maybe Dad.

He waited a long while, the shutter lever cocked on the Kodak and his finger on the release.

Like a half remembered dream, Dad was saying, "You never know when the big shot'll turn up. You've just got to be ready for it."

And after a while—after a long while, it seemed—there was a little noise: the back door opening. And slamming. Not loud, but loud enough.

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Mike sat up a little straighter, where he knelt alongside the bush. The bush had some kind of flower on it, even at Christmas time, in California, and it smelled beautiful, warm and sweet and like heaven might smell.

Another noise, pretty near. Steps on the grass down from the back door. It was hard to tell just where to point the lens; you kind of had to guess by the sound. He'd done what Dad called *gone by the book,* set it at f/4.5 and 1/50th second, with the number six flash. You had to kind of guess. And hope.

It went off like a bomb, only no noise—but that *kind* of feeling, one great big blinding flash.

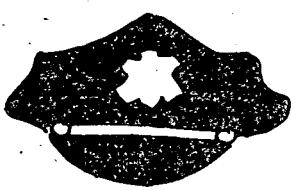
1/50th second. And Mike was on his feet, the next fiftieth second, and running.

One big blinding flash. Just that instant of time, lighting up everything. Sharp black-and-white. Shocking and clear.

Sammy there, bending, with the limp slender body over his shoulder, the long blonde hair hanging down over his chest. Sammy, his eyes and mouth three dark O's in the night. The shovel there on the ground in front of him.

You were supposed to turn the film right away, in case you forgot and made a double exposure. But Mike's hands were shaking so, he didn't think he could, even if he didn't have to run.

He ran, holding the Kodak and the new flash attachment against his chest, hard and safe and precious. He ran up the block toward the lights and the open stores full of Christmas shoppers and the tan-uniformed policeman on the corner. And the funniest way, it seemed he wasn't really running toward all that at all; he was running toward Dad, looking for him and finding him.



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a *NEW* short story by

JACK RITCHIE

A very different sort of story from Jack Ritchie, written shortly before his untimely and widely mourned death this past April . . .

THE JOURNEY

by JACK RITCHIE

It had been almost four months since Explorer III blasted off from this earth and now there was rioting in our streets.

My Minister of Order, Motanbee, was plainly worried. "Sir, last week alone there were three murders in Europe, five in Asia, and six in North America."

I drummed my fingers on my desk. Fourteen murders in one week. That was twice as many as we had on earth the entire last year.

"Society is disintegrating," Motanbee said. "Antisocial acts are spreading like wildfire. Mob action is sparked by the slightest of causes. There have been thousands of cases of physical assault. The malicious destruction of property and arson have risen to epidemic proportions. Sir, we are on the verge of anarchy."

I sighed. "Motanbee, can you think of any rational reason why the human race should not be blown to smithereens?"

He frowned reprovingly. "Sir, the human race must survive."

"Why?"

He smiled. "It is the basic instinct of all species to survive. And, after all, sir, you and I are human, too."

Yes, I reflected, we are all human on this earth and we still preserve the illusion that we have all remained equally so, though it is obvious to those who dare to face the truth that we have not.

I glanced at the clock. Another four long hours before I could retire to the eternity chamber for the day.

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Ah, yes, the eternity chamber. The Council of Ruling Elders rationed me to a mere eight hours each day. How I longed for more. Even twenty-four hours.

I glanced at Motanbee. He was an upper level, strata-three civil servant. His reward for a diligent day of service was one hour in the chamber, but I rather suspected that toward the end of that hour, he endured rather than enjoyed.

And what of those many beings out there on the surface of the earth? Those millions and millions of brother humans? I doubted very much if the great majority of them—had they been given the opportunity—could remain in the chamber for as much as ten minutes without pressing the panic button.

"Motanbee," I said. "Human beings are like sharks."

He blinked. "Like sharks, sir? Are you suggesting that they're voracious, deadly, predatory?"

"Of course they are, Motanbee. However, I wasn't thinking in those terms just now. I was thinking of motion. To keep living, the shark must keep in motion. Continuous, unending motion every moment of his damn life. If he stops moving, he drowns. He dies. Humans are like that, too, Motanbee. When they are not indulging in what they conceive to be purposeful activity—physical or mental—they fall apart. They drown. They die. They suffer from the dreadful compulsion to be useful."

Motanbee consulted his timepiece. "Sir, it's time for your daily communication with Explorer III."

I stifled a yawn. Yes, it was time to talk to the Explorer again. Explorer III. The triumph of our earth. The ultimate spaceship. The largest venture of any kind this earth had ever known. It had taken nearly seventy years to complete it.

Explorer III had finally blasted off this earth four months ago with 3,876 souls aboard. Its destination—Galaxy Septimal. Its mission—to measure another inch of the immeasurable universe.

I left my office and went down the corridor to Central Communications. I sat down before the viewer and time accelerator and in a moment Commander Ramske, Captain of Explorer, appeared on the screen.

He proceeded to give me his daily report, which did not really deviate essentially from yesterday's report or that of the day before. Finally he finished.

"In other words, Commander," I said, "everything aboard Explorer III is just peachy dandy?"

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"Yes, sir."

"No riots aboard the Explorer? Murders, suicides, assaults?"

"No, sir. There are no problems at all aboard the Explorer. Everything is functioning perfectly and morale is high."

Of course, I thought. Your people are not treading water. They have a mission, a purpose, an objective. They are moving. They have a spaceship to play with and they have run away to explore another insignificant mote of the universe.

Ramske cleared his throat. "I understand, sir, that for some unknown reason, there seems to be trouble on earth."

"Yes, Commander," I said. "We are having some trouble." I terminated our conversation and returned to my office.

Motanbee was waiting with more bad news. "Sir, there seems to be a strong nationalistic movement growing in China. There is even talk of secession from the United Nations of the Earth. If something isn't done, it might lead to a bloody civil war."

"Damn it," I said, "I thought nationalism was a dead issue hundreds of years ago."

"Yes, sir. It was. But now that the Explorer has been completed and left earth, people just seem to have more time on their hands than they know what to do with."

My temper rose. "We have a completely comprehensive earth program of sports, hobbies, self-improvement courses, and the like. There isn't a soul on this planet who cannot participate in some activity at some level. Why the hell can't people behave themselves and enjoy this paradise on earth?"

"Sir, our computers show that in order for humans—*most* humans, that is—to remain mentally and physically healthy, they must work an average of two hours a day at something they consider important, necessary, and/or constructive. Useful. Otherwise they become quite restless, and this restlessness rapidly worsens until there is personal and social disintegration. Hobbies and sports are not enough. People must be kept busy, of course—but for at least two hours each day, their busyness must have a purpose other than just to while away the time."

"Why does anybody need a *purpose* to justify his existence? To exist is in itself quite sufficient."

"Perhaps to you, sir, and a few others." He sighed heavily. "Generations of men and women worked on Explorer III. It was a project so huge it enveloped the efforts of the entire world like a giant

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spiderweb. Every soul on earth was in some way, directly or indirectly, involved in some aspect of the ship's creation. Explorer III was truly the only industry on earth with a creative purpose. But the completion and departure of Explorer III has left a void which cannot be filled. There's nothing left to occupy the minds, the hearts, or the souls of the people."

"All right," I snapped. "We'll build another damn space ship. Bigger and better. That ought to keep the earth busy for another seventy years."

Motanbee shook his head. "It wouldn't be quite the same, sir. Even an improved spaceship would really have noplace to go except to follow in the path of Explorer III. And that makes the entire project basically purposeless. Non-creative, if you will."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Then what is the solution? What is necessary to occupy the earth's idle hands and idle minds now? What must we build?"

Motanbee spread his hands helplessly. "I don't know, sir. There seems to be nothing left. Perhaps there really is no solution."

But there was a solution. A temporary solution. I had known what it would have to be for nearly a month now, but I had hoped desperately that I would not have to make it.

But it was my decision, my responsibility, my duty. I could not put it off until my term as Ruler ended three years from now and let my successor worry about it—by then it would be too late.

Motanbee put a new report on my desk. "Sir, according to our projections, the crime rate will rise geometrically rather than arithmetically. Before the end of the year there will be at least six thousand murders."

"Motanbee," I said, "Get the hell out of here and let me think."

When he was gone, I sighed. Was the human race doomed to destroy itself because its intellect could not keep pace with its technology? Was there any point in fighting the inevitable? Must one keep trying to save the species? Buy more time? Must one scratch for another year, another century, another thousand years in the faint hope that the human situation would somehow improve?

Or would it be wiser, more intelligent, to yield to the looming catastrophe?

I finally shook my head. No. Motanbee was right. The instinct to preserve the species lingered, even in me.

I unlocked the top drawer of my desk and pulled out the Secret

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Chronicle. Its existence and contents are known only to the President of the Council and his or her predecessors. When my term was up, I would pass it on to my successor.

I opened its pages and read again the history and fate of Explorers I and II, and the events which had transpired on earth after their blast-offs.

Yes, my duty was clear. It must happen again.

I left my office and strode purposefully back to Central Communications.

My eyes went to the almost inconspicuous row of numbered red buttons. They had been installed for the safety of this earth should Explorer III return to our galaxy with alien bacteria or any other form of life with which the earth could not cope. Only I had the authority to press them, if it proved necessary, and only I knew the sequence for activation.

I began pressing the buttons in their proper order.

When the impulse reached Explorer III, the ship and every one of the 3,876 humans aboard it would be blown to bits. Their deaths would be instantaneous and painless.

The act of killing them, of course, disturbed me greatly. But not nearly so much as the tragic *necessity* that it be done.

I returned to my office and waited.

Motanbee came to me eventually, his face white.

"I have bad news, sir. The worst news."

"By all means tell me," I suggested.

"The ship, sir. Explorer III. Communications with the Explorer have ceased entirely. There has been an accident, sir. Our instruments indicate that the ship has disintegrated. Totally disintegrated."

I waited until the news had been disseminated over the face of our globe and then I entered the broadcasting studio and sat down before the cameras. I waited for the signal and then began speaking.

"Citizens of earth, I come before you at this time to confirm the grave, the tragic news. All communications with Explorer III have ceased. Our instruments indicate that an accident has occurred. It appears that Explorer III has met the same fate as Explorers I and II."

I paused a few moments to let that sink in, and then continued.

"Citizens, no mere words of mine can express our government's feelings of shock and horror at the magnitude of this tragedy—the loss of the most magnificent spaceship this earth has ever produced.

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Nor can I adequately voice our sorrow at the deaths of 3,876 of our finest men and women."

Glancing at the monitor, I saw that my face was properly grave. "However, citizens of earth, we must not now yield to the temptation of despair. The human spirit—the *indomitable* human spirit—must rise to the occasion. It must spring from the ashes with a new hope, a new dedication." I thought that my voice crescendoed nicely. "The human mind cannot be defeated. It will triumph again in this hour of catastrophe. It will once again face the galaxies, the universe itself, with a renewed courage and determination."

I stared purposefully into the center camera. "I have talked to our Minister of Construction and I have ordered that the building of a new spaceship be begun immediately. A new Explorer—bigger, better, finer than Explorer III." I paused for effect. "We cannot be defeated. I am depending upon each and every one of you to put his shoulder to the wheel. I ask you to gird your loins to the task ahead, to accept the challenge. Together, you and I, we cannot fail in this magnificent task assigned to us by the very universe itself."

When I finished my speech, I bowed my head humbly and waited until I was off camera.

I was immediately overwhelmed with congratulations and enthusiasm from the entire studio staff and my ministers.

Motanbee's eyes shone. "That was a tremendous speech, sir. And I assure you that you can count on me completely for the giant task ahead."

My eyes went over their faces. Yes, I could see it on everyone's countenance. There was a new life, a new purpose in the air and I had no doubts but that it was being repeated at this moment everywhere on earth.

There would be no more riots, no more killings, no more deadly moments of freedom. The earth once again had a purpose.

I broke away from the enthusiasm and went downstairs, past the guards, and entered a small cell. It was finally time for my eight hours in the eternity chamber.

I lay down on the pallet. The walls began absorbing the beat of my heart, the whisper of the blood moving through my veins. *This* was the adventure. The journey to the point of all dimensions. The search for Why.

I was getting closer and closer. One day I would touch it . . .

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Donald Olson can always be counted on to deliver a good solid story about people entrapped by bewildering situations or relationships. He is one of the most dependable professionals in the mystery field, with more than fifty short stories and five novels to his credit so far. Need we add that he writes full time?

The black dog was of indefinable breed, perhaps part shepherd, part setter. At sight of Lucy, he retreated, growling. Three mornings later he was still there . . .

BEAST AT THE DOOR

by ***DONALD OLSON***

Old Mrs. Weyburn died at seven-thirty that evening, quite unexpectedly despite her precarious condition. The family and Dr. Catesby were summoned, and after a decent interval, her services no longer required, Lucy packed her bag and returned in her car to the secluded brick house on Barberry Road where she and her husband had lived ever since Clifford had assumed an assistant professorship in the natural-sciences department of the University.

It was dark when she arrived. Lights burned in the living room and kitchen and in Clifford's laboratory, which was actually a small greenhouse at the rear of the attached garage. Clifford's car, however, was not there, although the sound of a Haydn quartet coming from the stereo as Lucy entered the house suggested he would soon be back. Lucy was glad. Mrs. Weyburn's death had come as a shock. Lucy had grown fond of the old lady in the three days she had attended her, a job she had undertaken as a favor to Dr. Catesby when the regular nurse-companion had been called away by an

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illness in her own family. Lucy herself had done only intermittent nursing since she and Clifford had moved to the city.

Lucy changed out of her uniform and returned to the kitchen, where she discovered with a smile that Clifford hadn't bothered to wash the dishes after his evening meal before leaving the house. From the number of dishes, it was evident he hadn't dined alone. The remains of two salads and a scarcely touched salmon loaf stood on the counter along with a wedge of cheese and an empty soup can. Lucy swept the lettuce into the disposer and was about to do the same with the salmon, but then wrapped it in tinfoil instead and deposited it in the freezer. She herself loathed salmon, but she hated to waste good food even though Clifford refused to eat leftovers—one of the caprices Lucy had learned to live with over the years, obliging her to practice various forms of domestic deception. Clifford was an only child, and more than once Lucy had accused him of having been a very spoiled child.

She had just finished putting everything away and tidying the kitchen when she heard a sound at the front door. Removing her apron, she went to investigate, but when she switched on the light and looked out there was no one there. She opened the door and looked down to find a dog crouched almost at her feet. A black dog of indefinable breed, perhaps part shepherd, part setter. At sight of her the animal retreated, growling.

"Now where did you come from?" Lucy said, scanning the road for the dog's owner. Barberry Road was a favorite area for dog-walking—few houses and an abundance of trees and shrubbery. She saw no one. The dog cowered a few feet away, uttering a low whining sound.

"Go home, boy. Go on. Go home now."

The dog didn't move. Lucy shut the door and switched off the light. She was fond of dogs but the sight of a black one whining in the night less than an hour after she had been in the presence of death mildly unnerved her. She wished Clifford would come home.

She had been watching television for over an hour when she heard his car pull into the garage and the door swing shut. A moment or so later, she heard water running in the lavatory off the kitchen. Clifford came out with a glass of water in his hand. He was wearing jeans and the old college sweatshirt that made him look more like an ex-basketball player than a rising academic, even at thirty-seven.

"What are you doing home?" he asked.

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She laughed. "Well, thanks."

He bent to kiss her. "I didn't expect to see your car in the garage. You weren't supposed to be home until Sunday night. What happened?"

"Mrs. Weyburn died tonight."

"Sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very. Her heart gave out. So where have you been?"

He looked down at the glass in his hand. "Are we out of aspirin?"

"There should be some upstairs. Headache?"

"A real piledriver."

"I asked you where you'd been."

He glanced beyond her into the kitchen. "I drove Crandall home."

"*Herbert* Crandall? What induced you to invite *him* to dinner? I thought you detested him." The two men were presently competing for an important departmental promotion.

"He wanted to talk about the seminar agenda. I didn't feel in the mood to eat alone so I invited him over."

"Is there any word yet about the appointment?"

"Not for another week, at least." He wandered into the kitchen. "You needn't have cleaned up after me. I was going to do that when I came home."

"Well, now you can sit down and relax instead. You look tired. I'll get you an aspirin."

"What did you do with the salmon?"

"Tossed it out, of course. I wouldn't *dream* of serving you leftovers. Why, are you still hungry?"

He shook his head. "Crandall seemed to like it, but I didn't eat any. Only a little salad and cheese. No appetite."

"You haven't been eating properly for days. No wonder you're having headaches." She felt sure he was more worried about the appointment than he let on. She fetched him the aspirin and then took another look outside. "He's still there."

"Who is?"

"The dog."

"We don't have a dog."

"We do now, it appears. There's been one out there ever since I came home. A black one. He rather spooked me—because of Mrs. Weyburn, I suppose."

Clifford came to look over her shoulder. "Maybe he's a stray. He'll be gone in the morning." He yawned. "Too early for bed?"

Lucy smiled engagingly. "Is it ever?"

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She checked the doors and turned out the lights before following him upstairs. Presently, in bed, she whispered: "Did you miss me?"

"Frightfully."

"I missed you. It seemed funny sleeping alone."

"I know what you mean."

"I won't be lured away again. Not for a while anyway. I've more than enough volunteer work to keep me busy."

"Good," he murmured sleepily, his back to her.

"Darling, is everything okay?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"You seem a little tense tonight. Is it the appointment?"

"It's on my mind, sure."

"Crandall may have superb credentials," she reminded him, "but you did say he has a reputation for being a bit erratic."

"Prone to tipple, you mean. That won't affect the outcome. He's a first-rate teacher."

"I know, but you said the board is ultra-conservative when judging a man's personal character."

Her hand, lightly caressing his muscled shoulder, drew no response. With a faint regretful sigh, she moved away. In bed, as elsewhere, she had learned to govern her instincts by her husband's unpredictable moods. A familiar reverie lulled her to sleep—the fading but still active hope that they might still have a child.

When he came down to breakfast Lucy said, "That dog, he's still out there."

Clifford walked to the door and looked out. When he returned to the kitchen he wore a petulant, somber frown. "Have you ever seen him around here before?"

"No. He must be a stray, as you said. He looks well fed, though." Clifford sat and proceeded to eat his breakfast in silence. "What'll we do if he just stays here?" Lucy asked him.

"He won't if you don't feed him." When she didn't answer, he looked at her warningly. "And for God's sake, *don't.*"

"No, of course I won't."

When Lucy returned from doing the marketing, the dog was still there. As soon as she had put the groceries away she walked back through the garage and tried to approach the animal. Instantly he rose, tail drooping, teeth exposed in what seemed a half-hearted

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snarling grimace. Lucy stooped down, extending her hand beckoningly.

"Don't be so standoffish, boy, I'm not going to hurt you." The dog regarded her warily, causing Lucy to wonder if he had been abused and run away from home. But why choose this house? She was quite sure he was wearing a collar, but whether it bore any identification she didn't quite dare investigate.

Clifford's first words on entering the house that evening were: "I didn't expect to come home and find that beast at the door."

Lucy ignored the note of reproof, what she called his you've-burned-the-toast-again tone, and merely remarked that she'd been too busy to notice whether the dog was there or not.

"Then you didn't feed him?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "And don't scowl at me like that. It's not my fault he's still there."

Clifford strode to the door, flung it open, and glared at the dog curled up under the magnolia bush with a ferocity of expression that might have daunted a far more savage animal.

"I think he's adopted us," said Lucy.

"We'll see about that." Clifford stalked into the kitchen and came back carrying a dishpan full of boiling water. Lucy cried out in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"What's it look like? Open the door."

"Cliff, you can't. That's brutal."

Cradling the pan in one arm, he pulled the door open himself, stepped out, and flung the hot water toward the dog. Lucy was glad to see most of it fell short of its target.

"Damned cur," Clifford muttered. "That's all we need. Some stray mongrel messing up the lawn."

"Darling, don't get so upset. Maybe there'll be something in the lost-and-found ads tonight. He must have an owner."

"*Had* an owner, more likely. Who dropped the brute off here."

There were a number of lost-dog ads in the paper that night but none resembling *their* dog.

Clifford dropped the paper and said, "Very well, this is what I want you to do. Call the Animal Control Unit of the Police Department first thing in the morning. Tell them to pick that dog up before I get home tomorrow, or else I'll—I'll give him something more than a hot shower."

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Lucy felt, but dared not say, that he was using the dog as a release for some deeper tension she strongly suspected arose from his concern over the impending departmental appointment. All she did say was that she thought he was overreacting. "The poor dog hasn't done anything to you, darling. The way you're carrying on, one would think he'd taken a bite out of your leg."

"Well, he could. He could be rabid. Now you be sure to call them, understand?"

"Yes, master, I understand."

Lucy started to dial the number of the Animal Control Unit the following morning, but then instead, inspired by some spirit of defiance she couldn't have explained, she opened a package of frankfurters, stepped out onto the lawn, and flung one to the dog, who didn't hesitate to snap it up and wolf it down.

Idiot, she reproved herself. That was a dumb thing to do. And then, perversely, she called out to the dog: "Now go away! Go home! You can't stay here!"

Not surprisingly, the dog responded to this equivocation by loping toward her and nuzzling the hand that reached out to stroke his head.

Clifford called from the University at three that afternoon. "Did you call them?"

"I was going to but the dog disappeared," she lied. "I would have felt like a fool if they came way out here for nothing."

That evening Clifford came storming into the house as if primed to do battle with a legion of raging mastiffs. "I thought you said he'd gone!"

Lucy smiled innocently. "Hasn't he? He must have come back."

A grim smile formed on Clifford's handsome face. "Never mind. I'll take care of this myself, once and for all."

"What are you going to do?"

"I said never mind."

He swung around and headed for his lab. Lucy waited a few moments and then followed him. Her hand flew to her throat when she saw what he was doing.

"Cliff, what's that for?"

"Your pet's dinner."

"*My* pet?"

"You've been feeding him, haven't you?"

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"Don't be silly."

"Don't lie to me, Lucy. No dog is going to hang around a strange house if he isn't being fed."

She put her hand on his arm. "Darling, please be reasonable. Would it be such a bad idea to keep the dog? He'd be company for me while you're away."

"You know my answer to that."

"What are you putting in that meat?"

"A little flavoring."

She knew he used poisons in his botanical experiments. She felt a sick chill. "Cliff, you're *not* going to feed that poor animal poisoned meat. That's barbarous."

"Any better ideas?"

"I told you. Let me keep him. He needs a home."

He looked at her with smug disdain. "I suspected as much. You *have* been feeding the brute. If you can't have a child you'll at least have a dog, is that it?"

"Oh, Cliff, what a rotten thing to say."

"Don't tell me you don't think it's my fault. All that talk about seeing a doctor. You think you fooled me? Well, for your information, my love, there's nothing wrong with *me*. If we haven't had a child, you can blame yourself."

"That's ridiculous," she retorted. "I said perhaps *we* should see a doctor. I never said it was your fault."

"You didn't have to. I could tell what you were thinking."

"Then you're smarter than I am. I can never tell what *you're* thinking. Not lately. You go off into these moods when I haven't the dimmest idea what's on your mind. More and more, you've been shutting me out. I thought it was because you're worried about the appointment. Now I'm beginning to wonder."

Such an uncharacteristic show of defiance surprised him as greatly as it did her. "What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped.

"It means I'm getting a bit fed up with your selfish lack of consideration. Darling, I love you dearly, but I do get a little weary of having always to be the one to yield. Is it so wrong for me to want a child even if you don't? I had a good career back East. But did I object when you wanted to come out here? Did I say no when you practically demanded that I stay home and not work regularly? We go where you want to go, see the people you want to see. Do what you want to do. You were spoiled all your life and you expect me to

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go on spoiling you, catering to all your whims. There's no reason on earth why we shouldn't keep that dog."

"We can't afford to feed a dog."

"Oh, that's *funny*. We could feed five dogs on just the leftovers you're too finicky to eat."

He uttered a recriminatory laugh. "What have leftovers got to do with anything?"

Thinking of that perfectly good salmon loaf he believed she had thrown in the garbage, she could have cried out of sheer exasperation. "Nothing!" she said hotly. "Everything! But if you think I'm going to stand here while you poison a helpless, homeless animal you're very much mistaken."

With that she reached out and swept the plate of hamburger off the work table into the dustbin.

Clifford slept in his study that night and when Lucy came down in the morning to prepare breakfast, he was already gone. A note lay on the kitchen table: *Darling, please forgive me. I didn't mean to behave like an ogre.*

The note only added to the pangs of contrition to which she had awakened. Clifford's attitude about the dog was childish, of course, but no less extreme than her own outburst of frustration. What did she really have to complain about? Cliff had always been a good husband, she had a beautiful home and almost everything she could reasonably desire, and if she had been an unduly submissive wife whose fault was that but her own?

She called the Animal Control Unit as soon as she had finished breakfast. Less than an hour later the van arrived and she explained to the officer how the dog had been camped on their doorstep since the evening of the sixteenth. The animal offered no resistance as he was lifted into the van and borne away.

Shortly after noon the doorbell rang.

"Mrs. Phelps?"

"Yes."

The man produced his identification. "Detective John Gourley, Police Department. May I speak with you a moment, please?"

Curious and even a trifle alarmed, Lucy invited him into the house. He produced a notebook and pen. "Our Animal Control Unit picked up a dog here this morning. I believe you called them?"

"I did. But why—" And then suddenly she remembered something

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Clifford had said. "Oh, dear. The dog—*was* he rabid? Had he bitten someone?"

The detective shook his head. "You told the officer this morning that you didn't know who owns the dog. Is that correct?"

"No, of course we didn't know the owner. We'd have called him if we had."

"Her, Mrs. Phelps. The dog's owner is a woman named Joyce Madison. Is the name familiar?"

Lucy frowned. "No. Should it be?"

"Not necessarily. I thought it might be since she works in the administration office at the University. Your husband teaches there, does he not?"

"He does, but I don't recall his ever mentioning anyone with that name. Of course, Clifford doesn't know all the clerical personnel."

"The point is, Mrs. Phelps, a neighbor of Miss Madison saw the young woman leave her house—she lives alone—on the night of the sixteenth. The dog was with her. They both walked away and apparently that was the last anyone recalls seeing either. Until the dog was picked up this morning."

Lucy failed to grasp the significance of what he was telling her. "You're saying the dog belongs to this Madison woman? It's strange, I agree, that he kept hanging around here, but neither I nor my husband are acquainted with either the woman or her dog. I mean, neither one has ever been *here* before."

"Yet the dog was here and refused to leave."

Lucy smiled. "I'm afraid that was my fault. My husband advised me not to feed him but I did. Once."

"And you're positive your husband has never mentioned knowing Miss Madison?"

"Quite positive." Suddenly she saw the direction in which the man's remarks were leading. "Oh, but see here, I hope you're not implying that this woman *did* come here. That's absurd."

"May I ask what kind of car your husband drives, Mrs. Phelps?"

"Of course. A Ford station wagon."

"The reason I asked is that we've been told Miss Madison was occasionally visited by a man who drove a station wagon."

"That may be, but it certainly wasn't my husband."

"Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Phelps. I'll stop by the University and have a word with your husband. I'm sure he'll be able to verify what you've told me."

Despite the absurdity of the detective's insinuations, his visit left

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Lucy in a state of anxiety that nibbled away at her self-assurance no matter how many times she told herself it was all a stupid misunderstanding. The mere idea of Clifford being involved with another woman was ludicrous. He was anything but the philandering type, if for no other reason than that the faintest breath of scandal would ruin his chances of advancement at the University.

Still her mind kept drifting back to the evening of Mrs. Weyburn's death. She remembered the clutter of food and dishes in the kitchen when she arrived home, yet she could recollect nothing in Clifford's manner to indicate the slightest sense of guilt or mendacity. That he might have lied about Herbert Crandall having been his dinner guest was beyond serious consideration. Nonetheless it wasn't a strong enough conviction to prevent her, late in the afternoon, from picking up the phone and calling Gwendolyn Crandall.

"I happened to find it when I was vacuuming the dining room. I thought it might be Herbert's."

"Herbert's? Oh, no. That's impossible. Herbert never uses a lighter. Only matches. Besides, Herbert hasn't been in your house since the night you had us all for cocktails, months ago."

"Oh, I thought Cliff said something about Herbert being here on the sixteenth. For dinner. I was away on a case at the time."

"You must have misunderstood, Lucy. Certainly not on the sixteenth. That was our anniversary and he took me out to dinner."

Clifford arrived home displaying a jauntiness of manner which somehow conflicted with the look in his eyes. Lucy asked him at once about the detective's visit.

Cliff made a dismissive gesture. "Yes, he stopped by for a few minutes. Have you ever heard of anything more preposterous? Some woman vanishes and her dog is found skulking about our property. Therefore I must have known the woman."

"Did you?" she asked in hardly more than a whisper.

"No. Not really. I knew who she was."

"And that she'd disappeared?"

"There's been some talk about it. I never pay attention to campus gossip."

"You never mentioned it to me."

"No reason to."

"That detective. He said a man visited her, in a station wagon."

His gaze, dull but reproachful, focused on her for the first time. "Darling, I hope you don't think *I* ever visited her."

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Lucy was the first to look away. "Cliff, you may as well know. I called Gwendolyn Crandall. She said her husband wasn't here on the sixteenth. Who *was* here that night?"

What happened then was more of a shock to Lucy than when she had walked into Mrs. Weyburn's bedroom and found the old lady dead. For now it was as if the life force, in the space of an instant, had drained out of Clifford's body as well. His shoulders sagged; his facial muscles seemed to collapse: as if suddenly blinded, he groped for the arm of a chair and crumpled into it.

"Cliff! What is it?"

He didn't look up. His voice was as empty of expression as his ashen face. "She hounded me, darling. I only spoke to her a few times and she—she developed some sort of idiotic crush on me. She kept sending me notes. She waylaid me when I left the campus. I told her to leave me alone. I told her I wasn't interested.She started to threaten me. She said she was pregnant and was going to tell the dean I was responsible. It was stupid, but I did go to her home a couple of times, just to try to reason with her. She wouldn't listen to me. That night she showed up here. I was just sitting down to dinner. I tried to be polite. I even invited her to join me. I pleaded with her and I think I finally got through to her. At least she promised to stop annoying me. She left right after dinner. God knows what happened to her after that."

Suddenly his head snapped up and he stared at her with a look of thickening horror. "My God, darling, do you think she might have—might have done something to herself?"

His confession stunned Lucy, yet his air of woeful consternation brought her to her knees beside his chair. She took his hands in hers and tried to reassure him even though her own thoughts were a muddle of uncertainty.

"The dog. Was he with her?"

"Yes. She left him out front."

"And when she went away, why didn't she take the dog with her?"

"I know. That's what's been driving me out of my mind ever since that night. She must have ordered him not to follow her. And that could only mean she must have planned— But she couldn't have. She wouldn't have. Not over some silly schoolgirl infatuation."

"But, Cliff, where did *you* go that night?"

He ran a hand roughly through his hair. "I honestly don't remember. I had to get out of the house. I went for a long drive."

"You told all this to the detective?"

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"I had to. There was no point in lying to him. If he thought I was trying to hide the truth, you can imagine what he might have suspected."

"Then don't worry." She kept pressing his hands. "You don't think this might hurt your chances for the appointment, do you? I mean if it all comes out?"

He heaved a long, despairing sigh. "The appointment. God, I've scarcely given a serious thought to that for days."

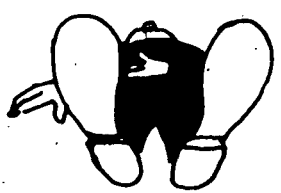
"Well, try not to worry about it. She's bound to show up. If she'd done anything to herself, they would certainly have found her by now." She searched his eyes. "I wish you'd told me about this right from the start."

He regarded her with a melancholy look. "Would you have believed me? That I was innocent? That I'd never encouraged her?"

"Do you have to ask? Darling, let's not talk about it any longer. Go and wash up. I had a bowl of soup while I was waiting for you. Your dinner will be ready when you come down."

She tried to behave as if everything was as usual as he sat down to eat, but Clifford seemed as oblivious of her presence as he was of the food she had placed before him. Gently, she encouraged him to eat. Seconds later he suddenly dropped his fork, his hand clawed at his chest, and with a look of excruciating agony he pitched forward across the table.

Only after that first paralyzing shock did she realize with intuitive certainty what she had done—and what he had done. Unable to move, she stared with dreadful comprehension at the croquettes on his plate. The croquettes she had made from the leftover salmon he had served his guest on the night of the sixteenth.



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a Brother Cadfael story by

ELLIS PETERS

Ellis Peters is not only one of the greatest writers of suspense we have, she is one of those rare and wonderful writers who can evoke a far time and place in which the reader feels instantly comfortable and somehow secure. Of her most recent novel, The Virgin in the Ice, Publishers Weekly *said: "A splendid combination of romance, mystery, swashbuckling, this sixth chronicle of Brother Cadfael, Twelfth Century Benedictine monk, is the best Ellis Peters has given us yet . . ."*

It was with mild and detached interest that Brother Cadfael, who had been in the world fifty-five years and had learned to temper all his expectations, bad and good, observed the arrival of the party from Lidyate on the morning of Christmas Eve . . .

THE PRICE OF LIGHT

by ELLIS PETERS

Hamo FitzHamon of Lidyate held two fat manors in the north-eastern corner of the county, towards the border of Cheshire. Though a gross feeder, a heavy drinker, a self-indulgent lecher, a harsh landlord, and a brutal master, he had reached the age of sixty in the best of health, and it came as a salutary shock to him when he was at last taken with a mild seizure, and for the first time in his life saw the next world yawning before him, and awoke to the uneasy consciousness that it might see fit to treat him somewhat more austerely than this world had done.

Though he repented none of them, he was aware of a whole register of acts in his past which heaven might construe as heavy sins. It began to seem to him a prudent precaution to acquire merit for his

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soul as quickly as possible. Also as cheaply, for he was a grasping and possessive man. A judicious gift to some holy house should secure the welfare of his soul. There was no need to go so far as endowing an abbey, or a new church of his own. The Benedictine abbey of Shrewsbury could put up a powerful assault of prayers on his behalf in return for a much more modest gift.

The thought of alms to the poor, however ostentatiously bestowed in the first place, did not recommend itself. Whatever was given would be soon consumed and forgotten, and a ragtag of beggarly blessings from the indigent could carry very little weight, besides failing to confer a lasting luster upon himself. No, he wanted something that would continue in daily use and daily respectful notice, a permanent reminder of his munificence and piety.

He took his time about making his decision, and when he was satisfied of the best value he could get for the least expenditure, he sent his law-man to Shrewsbury to confer with abbot and prior, and conclude with due ceremony and many witnesses the charter that conveyed to the custodian of the altar of St. Mary, within the abbey church, one of his free tenant farmers, the rent to provide light for Our Lady's altar throughout the year. He promised also, for the proper displaying of his charity, the gift of a pair of fine silver candlesticks, which he himself would bring and see installed on the altar at the coming Christmas feast.

Abbot Heribert, who after a long life of repeated disillusionments still contrived to think the best of everybody, was moved to tears by this penitential generosity. Prior Robert, himself an aristocrat, refrained, out of Norman solidarity, from casting doubt upon Hamo's motives, but he elevated his eyebrows all the same. Brother Cadfael, who knew only the public reputation of the donor and was sceptical enough to suspend judgment until he encountered the source, said nothing, and waited to observe and decide for himself. Not that he expected much; he had been in the world fifty-five years and learned to temper all his expectations, bad or good.

It was with mild and detached interest that he observed the arrival of the party from Lidyate on the morning of Christmas Eve. A hard, cold Christmas it was proving to be, all bitter black frost and grudging snow, thin and sharp as whips before a withering east wind. The weather had been vicious all the year, and the harvest a disaster. In the villages, people shivered and starved, and Brother Oswald the almoner fretted and grieved the more that the alms he had to

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distribute were not enough to keep all those bodies and souls together.

The sight of a cavalcade of three good riding horses, ridden by travelers richly wrapped up from the cold and followed by two pack-ponies, brought all the wretched petitioners crowding and crying, holding out hands blue with frost. All they got out of it was a single perfunctory handful of small coin, and when they hampered his movements FitzHamon used his whip as a matter of course to clear the way. Rumor, thought Brother Cadfael, pausing on his way to the infirmary with his daily medicines for the sick, had probably not done Hamo FitzHamon any injustice.

Dismounting in the great court, the knight of Lidyate was seen to be a big, over-fleshed, topheavy man with bushy hair and beard and eyebrows, all grey-streaked from their former black, and stiff and bristling as wire. He might well have been a very handsome man before indulgence purpled his face and pocked his skin and sank his sharp black eyes deep into flabby sacks of flesh. He looked more than his age, but still a man to be reckoned with.

The second horse carried his lady, pillion behind a groom. A small figure she made, even swathed almost to invisibility in her woollens and furs, and she rode snuggled comfortably against the groom's broad back, her arms hugging him round the waist. And a very well looking young fellow he was; this groom, a strapping lad barely twenty years old, with round, ruddy cheeks and merry, guileless eyes, long in the legs, wide in the shoulders, everything a country youth should be, and attentive to his duties into the bargain, for he was down from the saddle in one lithe leap and reaching up to take the lady by the waist, every bit as heartily as she had been clasping him a moment before, and lift her lightly down. Small gloved hands rested on his shoulders a brief moment longer than was necessary. His respectful support of her continued until she was safe on the ground and sure of her footing; perhaps a few seconds more. Hamo FitzHamon was occupied with Prior Robert's ceremonious welcome and the attentions of the hospitaler, who had made the best rooms of the guest-hall ready for him.

The third horse also carried two people but the woman on the pillion did not wait for anyone to help her down, but slid quickly to the ground and hurried to help her mistress off with the great outer cloak in which she had traveled. A quiet, submissive young woman, perhaps in her middle twenties, perhaps older, in drab homespun, her hair hidden away under a coarse linen wimple, her face was

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thin and pale, her skin dazzlingly fair, and her eyes, reserved and weary, were of a pale, clear blue, a fierce color that ill suited their humility and resignation.

Lifting the heavy folds from her lady's shoulders, the maid showed a head the taller of the two, but drab indeed beside the bright little bird that emerged from the cloak. Lady FitzHamon came forth graciously smiling on the world in scarlet and brown, like a robin, and just as confidently. She had dark hair braided about a small, shapely head, soft full cheeks flushed rosy by the chill air, and large dark eyes assured of their charm and power.

She could not possibly have been more than thirty, probably not so much. FitzHamon had a grown son somewhere, with children of his own, and waiting, some said, with little patience for his inheritance. This girl must be a second or a third wife, a good deal younger than her stepson, and a beauty at that. Hamo was secure enough and important enough to keep himself supplied with wives as he wore them out. This one must have cost him dear, for she had not the air of a poor but pretty relative sold for a profitable alliance; rather she looked as if she knew her own status very well indeed and meant to have it acknowledged. She would look well presiding over the high table at Lidyate, certainly, which was probably the main consideration.

The groom behind whom the maid had ridden was an older man, lean and wiry, with a face like the bole of a knotty oak. By the sardonic patience of his eyes, he had been in close and relatively favored attendance on FitzHamon for many years, knew the best and the worst his moods could do, and was sure of his own ability to ride the storms. Without a word, he set about unloading the packhorses and followed his lord to the guest-hall, while the young man took FitzHamon's bridle and led the horses away to the stables.

Cadfael watched the two women cross to the doorway, the lady springy as a young hind, with bright eyes taking in everything around her, the tall maid keeping always a pace behind, with long steps curbed to keep her distance. Even thus, frustrated like a mewed hawk, she had a graceful gait. Almost certainly of villein stock, like the two grooms. Cadfael had long practice in distinguishing the free from the unfree. Not that the free had any easy life, often they were worse off than the villeins of their neighborhood; there were plenty of free men, this Christmas, gaunt and hungry, forced to hold out begging hands among the throng round the gatehouse. Freedom, the

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first ambition of every man, still could not fill the bellies of wives and children in a bad season.

FitzHamon and his party appeared at Vespers in full glory, to see the candlesticks reverently installed upon the altar in the Lady Chapel. Abbot, prior, and brothers had no difficulty in sufficiently admiring the gift, for they were indeed things of beauty, two fluted stems ending in the twin cups of flowering lilies. Even the veins of the leaves showed delicate and perfect as in the living plant. Brother Oswald the almoner, himself a skilled silversmith when he had time to exercise his craft, stood gazing at the new embellishments of the altar with a face and mind curiously torn between rapture and regret, and ventured to delay the donor for a moment as he was being ushered away to sup with Abbot Heribert in his lodging.

"My lord, these are of truly noble workmanship. I have some knowledge of precious metals, and of the most notable craftsmen in these parts, but I never saw any work so true to the plant as this. A countryman's eye is here, but the hand of a court craftsman. May we know who made them?"

FitzHamon's marred face curdled into deeper purple, as if an unpardonable shadow had been cast upon his hour of self-congratulation. He said brusquely: "I commissioned them from a fellow in my own service. You would not know his name—a villein born, but he had some skill." And with that he swept on, avoiding further question, and wife and menservants and maid trailed after him. Only the older groom, who seemed less in awe of his lord than anyone, perhaps by reason of having so often presided over the ceremony of carrying him dead-drunk to his bed, turned back for a moment to pluck at Brother Oswald's sleeve and advise him in a confidential whisper: "You'll find him short to question on that head. The silversmith—Alard, his name was—cut and ran from his service last Christmas, and for all they hunted him as far as London, where the signs pointed, he's never been found. I'd let that matter lie if I were you."

And with that he trotted away after his master, and left several thoughtful faces staring after him.

"Not a man to part willingly with any property of his," mused Brother Cadfael, "metal or man, but for a price, and a steep price at that."

"Brother, be ashamed!" reproved Brother Jerome at his elbow. "Has he not parted with these very treasures for pure charity?"

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Cadfael refrained from elaborating on the profit FitzHamon expected for his benevolence. It was never worth arguing with Jerome, who in any case knew as well as anyone that the silver lilies and the rent of one farm were no free gift. But Brother Oswald said grievingly: "I wish he had directed his charity better. Surely these are beautiful things, a delight to the eyes, but well sold they could have provided money enough to buy the means of keeping my poorest petitioners alive through the winter, some of whom will surely die for the want of them."

Brother Jerome was scandalized. "Has he not given them to Our Lady herself?" he lamented indignantly. "Beware of the sin of those apostles who cried out with the same complaint against the woman who brought the pot of spikenard and poured it over the Saviour's feet. Remember Our Lord's reproof to them, that they should let her alone, for she had done well!"

"Our Lord was acknowledging a well meant impulse of devotion," said Brother Oswald with spirit. "He did not say it was well advised! 'She hath done what she could' is what he said. He never said that with a little thought she might not have done better. What use would it have been to wound the giver after the thing was done? Spilled oil of spikenard could hardly be recovered."

His eyes dwelt with love and compunction upon the silver lilies, with their tall stems of wax and flame. For these remained, and to divert them to other use was still possible, or would have been possible if the donor had been a more approachable man. He had, after all, a right to dispose as he wished of his own property.

"It is sin," admonished Jerome sanctimoniously, "even to covet for other use, however worthy, that which has been given to Our Lady. The very thought is sin."

"If Our Lady could make her own will known," said Brother Cadfael drily, "we might learn which is the graver sin, and which the more acceptable sacrifice."

"Could any price be too high for the lighting of this holy altar?" demanded Jerome.

It was a good question, Cadfael thought, as they went to supper in the refectory. Ask Brother Jordan, for instance, the value of light. Jordan was old and frail, and gradually going blind. As yet he could distinguish shapes, but like shadows in a dream, though he knew his way about cloisters and precincts so well that his gathering darkness was no hindrance to his freedom of movement. But as every day the twilight closed in on him by a shade, so did his profound

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love of light grow daily more devoted, until he had forsaken other duties and taken upon himself to tend all the lamps and candles on both altars, for the sake of being always irradiated by light, and sacred light at that. As soon as Compline was over this evening, he would be busy devoutly trimming the wicks of candle and lamp, to have the steady flames smokeless and immaculate for the Matins of Christmas Day. It was doubtful if he would go to his bed at all until Matins and Lauds were over. The very old need little sleep, and sleep is itself a kind of darkness. But what Jordan treasured was the flame of light, and not the vessel holding it; and would not those splendid two-pound candles shine upon him just as well from plain wooden sconces?

Cadfael was in the warming-house with the rest of the brothers about a quarter of an hour before Compline when a lay brother from the guest-hall came enquiring for him.

"The lady asks if you'll speak with her. She's complaining of a bad head and that she'll never be able to sleep. Brother Hospitaler recommended her to you for a remedy."

Cadfael went with him without comment, but with some curiosity, for at Vespers the Lady FitzHamon had looked in blooming health and sparkling spirits. Nor did she seem greatly changed when he met her in the hall, though she was still swathed in the cloak she had worn to cross the great court to and from the abbot's house and had the hood so drawn that it shadowed her face. The silent maid hovered at her shoulder.

"You are Brother Cadfael? They tell me you are expert in herbs and medicines, and can certainly help me. I came early back from the lord abbot's supper with a headache and have told my lord that I shall go early to bed. But I have such disturbed sleep, and with this pain how shall I be able to rest? Can you give me some draught that will ease me? They say you have a perfect apothecarium in your herb-garden, and all your own work, growing, gathering, drying, brewing, and all. There must be something there that can soothe pain and bring deep sleep."

Well, thought Cadfael, small blame to her if she sometimes sought a means to ward off her old husband's rough attentions for a night, especially for a festival night when he was likely to have drunk heavily. Nor was it Cadfael's business to question whether the petitioner really needed his remedies. A guest might ask for whatever the house afforded.

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"I have a syrup of my own making," he said, "which may do you good service. I'll bring you a vial of it from my workshop store."

"May I come with you? I should like to see your workshop." She had forgotten to sound frail and tired. The voice could have been a curious child's. "As I already am cloaked and shod," she said winningly. "We just returned from the lord abbot's table."

"But should you not go in from the cold, madam? Though the snow's swept here in the court, it lies on some of the garden paths."

"A few minutes in the fresh air will help me," she said, "before trying to sleep. And it cannot be far."

It was not far. Once away from the subdued lights of the buildings, they were aware of the stars, snapping like sparks from a cold fire, in a clear black sky just engendering a few tattered snow-clouds in the east. In the garden, between the pleached hedges, it seemed almost warm, as though the sleeping trees breathed tempered air as well as cutting off the bleak wind. The silence was profound. The herb-garden was walled, and the wooden hut where Cadfael brewed and stored his medicines was sheltered from the worst of the cold. Once inside and a small lamp kindled, Lady FitzHamon forgot her invalid role in wonder and delight, looking round her with bright, inquisitive eyes. The maid, submissive and still, scarcely turned her head, but her eyes ranged from left to right and a faint color touched life into her cheeks. The many faint, sweet scents made her nostrils quiver and her lips curve just perceptibly with pleasure.

Curious as a cat, the lady probed into every sack and jar and box, peered at mortars and bottles, and asked a hundred questions in a breath.

"And this is rosemary, these little dried needles? And in this great sack—is it grain?" She plunged her hands wrist-deep inside the neck of it, and the hut was filled with sweetness. "Lavender! Such a great harvest of it? Do you, then, prepare perfumes for us women?"

"Lavender has other good properties," said Cadfael. He was filling a small vial with a clear syrup he made from eastern poppies, a legacy of his crusading years. "It is helpful for all disorders that trouble the head and spirit, and its scent is calming. I'll give you a little pillow filled with that and other herbs that shall help to bring you sleep. But this draught will ensure it. You may take all that I give you here and get no harm, only a good night's rest."

She had been playing inquisitively with a pile of small clay dishes he kept by his work-bench, rough dishes in which the fine seeds sifted from fruiting plants could be spread to dry out, but she came

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at once to gaze eagerly at the modest vial he presented to her. "Is it enough? It takes much to give me sleep."

"This," he assured her patiently, "would bring sleep to a strong man. But it will not harm even a delicate lady like you."

She took it in her hand with a small, sleek smile of satisfaction. "Then I thank you indeed! I will make a gift—shall I?—to your almoner in requital. Elfgiva, you bring the little pillow. I shall breathe it all night long. It should sweeten dreams."

So her name was Elfgiva. A Norse name. She had Norse eyes, as he had already noted, blue as ice, and pale fine skin worn finer and whiter by weariness. All this time she had noted everything that passed, motionless, and never said a word. Was she older or younger than her lady? There was no guessing. The one was so clamant and the other so still.

He put out his lamp and closed the door, and led them back to the great court just in time to take leave of them and still be prompt for Compline. Clearly the lady had no intention of attending. As for the lord, he was just being helped away from the abbot's lodging, his grooms supporting him one on either side, though as yet he was not gravely drunk. They headed for the guest-hall at an easy roll. No doubt only the hour of Compline had concluded the drawn-out supper, probably to the abbot's considerable relief. He was no drinker and could have very little in common with Hamo FitzHamon. Apart, of course, from a deep devotion to the altar of St. Mary.

The lady and her maid had already vanished within the guest-hall. The younger groom carried in his free hand a large jug, full, to judge by the way he held it. The young wife could drain her draught and clutch her herbal pillow with confidence; the drinking was not yet at an end, and her sleep would be solitary and untroubled. Brother Cadfael went to Compline mildly sad, and obscurely comforted.

Only when service was ended, and the brothers on the way to their beds, did he remember that he had left his flask of poppy syrup unstoppered. Not that it would come to any harm in the frosty night, but his sense of fitness drove him to go and remedy the omission before he slept.

His sandaled feet, muffled in strips of woollen cloth for warmth and safety on the frozen paths, made his coming quite silent, and he was already reaching out a hand to the latch of the door, but not yet touching, when he was brought up short and still by the murmur of voices within. Soft, whispering, dreamy voices that made sounds

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less and more than speech, caresses rather than words, though once at least words surfaced for a moment. A man's voice, young, wary, saying: "But how if he *does?*" And a woman's soft, suppressed laughter: "He'll sleep till morning, never fear!" And her words were suddenly hushed with kissing, and her laughter became huge, ecstatic sighs, the young man's breath heaving triumphantly. But still, a moment later, the note of fear again, half enjoyed: "Still, you know him. He *may*—" And she, soothing: "Not for an hour at least—then we'll go. It will grow cold here—"

That, at any rate, was true; small fear of them wishing to sleep out the night here, even two close-wrapped in one cloak on the bench-bed against the wooden wall.

Brother Cadfael withdrew very circumspectly from the herb-garden and made his way back in chastened thought towards the dortoir. Now he knew who had swallowed that draught of his, and it was not the lady. In the pitcher of wine the young groom had been carrying? Enough for a strong man, even if he had not been drunk already. Meantime, no doubt, the body-servant was left to put his lord to bed, somewhere apart from the chamber where the lady lay supposedly nursing her indisposition and sleeping the sleep of the innocent. Ah, well, it was no business of Cadfael's, nor had he any intention of getting involved. He did not feel particularly censorious. Doubtful if she ever had any choice about marrying Hamo; and with this handsome boy forever about them, to point the contrast—

A brief experience of genuine passion, echoing old loves, pricked sharply through the years of his vocation. At least he knew what he was condoning. And who could help feeling some admiration for her opportunist daring, the quick wit that had procured the means, the alert eye that had seized on the most remote and adequate shelter available?

Cadfael went to bed, and slept without dreams, and rose at the Matin bell some minutes before midnight. The procession of the brothers wound its way down the night stairs into the church, and into the soft, full glow of the lights before St. Mary's altar.

Withdrawn reverently some yards from the step of the altar, old Brother Jordan, who should long ago have been in his cell with the rest, kneeled upright with clasped hands and ecstatic face, in which the great veiled eyes stared full into the light he loved. When Prior Robert exclaimed in concern at finding him there on the stones, and

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laid a hand on his shoulder, he started as if out of a trance, and lifted to them a countenance itself all light.

"Oh, brothers, I have been so blessed! I have lived through a wonder! Praise God that ever it was granted to me! But bear with me, for I am forbidden to speak of it to any for three days. On the third day from today I may speak—!"

"Look, brothers!" wailed Jerome suddenly, pointing. "Look at the altar!"

Every man present, except Jordan, who still serenely prayed and smiled, turned to gape where Jerome pointed. The tall candles stood secured by drops of their own wax in two small clay dishes such as Cadfael used for sorting seeds. The two silver lilies were gone from the place of honor.

Through loss, disorder, consternation, and suspicion, Prior Robert would still hold fast to the order of the day. Let Hamo FitzHamon sleep in happy ignorance till morning, still Matins and Lauds must be properly celebrated. Christmas was larger than all the giving and losing of silverware. Grimly he saw the services of the church observed, and despatched the brethren back to their beds until Prime, to sleep or lie wakeful and fearful, as they might. Nor would he allow any pestering of Brother Jordan by others, though possibly he did try in private to extort something more satisfactory from the old man.

Clearly the theft, whether he knew anything about it or not, troubled Jordan not at all. To everything he said only: "I am enjoined to silence until midnight of the third day." And when asked by whom, he smiled seraphically, and was silent.

It was Robert himself who broke the news to Hamo FitzHamon in the morning, before Mass. The uproar, though vicious, was somewhat tempered by the aftereffects of Cadfael's poppy draught, which dulled the edge of energy if not of malice. His body-servant, the older groom, Sweyn, was keeping well back out of reach, even with Robert still present, and the lady sat somewhat apart, too, as though still frail and possibly a little out of temper. She exclaimed dutifully, and apparently sincerely, at the outrage done to her husband, and echoed his demand that the thief should be hunted down and the candlesticks recovered.

Prior Robert was just as zealous in the matter. No effort should be spared to regain the princely gift, of that they could be sure. He had already made certain of various circumstances which should

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limit the hunt. There had been a brief fall of snow after Compline, just enough to lay down a clean film of white on the ground. No single footprint had as yet marked this pure layer. He had only to look for himself at the paths leading from both parish doors of the church to see that no one had left by that way. The porter would swear that no one had passed the gatehouse; and on the one side of the abbey grounds not walled, the Meole brook was full and frozen but the snow on both sides of it was virgin. Within the enclave, of course, tracks and cross-tracks were trodden out everywhere; but no one had left the enclave since Compline, when the candlesticks were still in their place.

"So the miscreant is still within the walls?" said Hamo, glinting vengefully. "So much the better! Then his booty is still here within, too, and if we have to turn all your abode doors out of dortoirs, we'll find it! It, and him!"

"We will search everywhere," agreed Robert, "and question every man. We are as deeply offended as your lordship at this blasphemous crime. You may yourself oversee the search if you will."

So all that Christmas Day, alongside the solemn rejoicings in the church, an angry hunt raged about the precincts in full cry. It was not difficult for all the monks to account for their time to the last minute, their routine being so ordered that brother inevitably extricated brother from suspicion; and such as had special duties that took them out of the general view, like Cadfael in his visit to the herb-garden, had all witnesses to vouch for them. The lay brothers ranged more freely, but tended to work in pairs, at least. The servants and the few guests protested their innocence, and if they had not, all of them, others willing to prove it, neither could Hamo prove the contrary.

When it came to his own two grooms, there were several witnesses to testify that Sweyn had returned to his bed in the lofts of the stables as soon as he had put his lord to bed, and certainly empty-handed; and Sweyn, as Cadfael noted with interest, swore unblinkingly that young Madoc, who had come in an hour after him, had nonetheless returned with him, and spent that hour, at Sweyn's order, tending one of the pack-ponies below, which showed signs of a cough, and that otherwise they had been together throughout.

A villein instinctively closing ranks with his kind against his lord, wondered Cadfael? Or does Sweyn know very well where that young man was last night, or at least what he was about, and is he intent

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on protecting him from a worse vengeance? No wonder Madoc looked a shade less merry and ruddy than usual this morning, though on the whole he kept his countenance very well, and refrained from even looking at the lady, while her tone to him was cool, sharp, and distant.

Cadfael left them hard at it again after the miserable meal they made of dinner, and went into the church alone. While they were feverishly searching every corner for the candlesticks he had forborne from taking part, but now that they were elsewhere he might find something of interest there. He would not be looking for anything so obvious as two large silver candlesticks. He made obeisance at the altar and mounted the step to look closely at the burning candles. No one had paid any attention to the modest containers that had been substituted for Hamo's gift; and just as well, in the circumstances, that Cadfael's workshop was very little visited, or these little clay pots might have been recognized as coming from there. He moulded and baked them himself as he wanted them. He had no intention of condoning theft, but neither did he relish the idea of any creature, however sinful, falling into Hamo FitzHamon's mercies.

Something long and fine, a thread of silver-gold, was caught and coiled in the wax at the base of one candle. Carefully he detached candle from holder, and unlaced from it a long, pale hair. To make sure of retaining it, he broke off the imprisoning disc of wax with it and then hoisted and turned the candle to see if anything else was to be found under it. One tiny oval dot showed; with a fingernail he extracted a single seed of lavender. Left in the dish from beforetime? He thought not. The stacked pots were all empty. No, this had been brought here in the fold of a sleeve, most probably, and shaken out while the candle was being transferred.

The lady had plunged both hands with pleasure into the sack of lavender, and moved freely about his workshop investigating everything. It would have been easy to take two of these dishes unseen, and wrap them in a fold of her cloak. Even more plausibly, she might have delegated the task to young Madoc when they crept away from their assignation. Supposing, say, they had reached the desperate point of planning flight together and needed funds to set them on their way to some safe refuge . . . yes, there were possibilities. In the meantime, the grain of lavender had given Cadfael another idea. And there was, of course, that long, fine hair, pale as flax, but brighter. The boy was fair. But so fair?

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He went out through the frozen garden to his herbarium, shut himself securely into his workshop, and opened the sack of lavender, plunging both arms to the elbow and groping through the chill, smooth sweetness that parted and slid like grain.

They were there, well down. His fingers traced the shape first of one, then a second. He sat down to consider what must be done.

Finding the lost valuables did not identify the thief. He could produce and restore them at once, but FitzHamon would certainly pursue the hunt vindictively until he found the culprit and Cadfael had seen enough of him to know that it might cost life and all before this complainant was satisfied. He needed to know more before he would hand over any man to be done to death.

Better not leave the things here, however. He doubted if they would ransack his hut, but they might. He rolled the candlesticks in a piece of sacking and thrust them into the center of the pleached hedge where it was thickest. The meager, frozen snow had dropped with the brief sun. His arm went in to the shoulder, and when he withdrew it the twigs sprang back and covered all, holding the package securely. Whoever had first hidden it would surely come by night to reclaim it, and show a human face at last.

It was well that he had moved it, for the searchers, driven by an increasingly angry Hamo, reached his hut before Vespers, examined everything within it while he stood by to prevent actual damage to his medicines, and went away satisfied that what they were seeking was not there. They had not, in fact, been very thorough about the sack of lavender; the candlesticks might well have escaped notice even if he had left them there. It did not occur to anyone to tear the hedges apart, luckily. When they were gone, to probe all the fodder and grain in the barns, Cadfael restored the silver to its original place. Let the bait lie safe in the trap until the quarry came to claim it, as he surely would, once relieved of the fear that the hunters might find it first.

Cadfael kept watch that night. He had no difficulty in absenting himself from the dortoir once everyone was in bed and asleep. His cell was by the night stairs and the prior slept at the far end of the long room, and slept deeply. And bitter though the night air was, the sheltered hut was barely colder than his cell, and he kept blankets there for swathing some of his jars and bottles against frost. He took his little box with tinder and flint, and hid himself in the

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corner behind the door. It might be a wasted vigil; the thief, having survived one day, might think it politic to venture yet another before removing his spoils.

But it was not wasted. He reckoned it might be as late as ten o'clock when he heard a light hand at the door. Two hours before the bell would sound for Matins, almost two hours since the household had retired. Even the guest-hall should be silent and asleep by now. The hour was carefully chosen.

Cadfael held his breath and waited. The door swung slowly open, a shadow stole past him, light steps felt their way unerringly to where the sack of lavender was propped against the wall. Equally silently, Cadfael swung the door to again and set his back against it. Only then did he strike a spark, and hold the blown flame to the wick of his little lamp.

She did not start or cry out or try to rush past him and escape into the night. The attempt would not have succeeded, and she had had long practice in enduring what could not be cured. She stood facing him as the small flame steadied and burned taller, her face shadowed by the hood of her cloak, the candlesticks clasped possessively to her breast.

"Elfgiva," said Brother Cadfael gently. And then: "Are you here for yourself or for your mistress?" But he thought he knew the answer already. That frivolous young wife would never really leave her rich husband and easy life, however tedious and unpleasant Hamo's attentions might be, to risk everything with her penniless villein lover. She would only keep him to enjoy in secret whenever she felt it safe. Even when the old man died, she would submit to marriage at an overlord's will to another equally distasteful. She was not the stuff of which heroines and adventurers are made. This was another kind of woman.

Cadfael went close and lifted a hand gently to put back the hood from her head. She was tall, a hand's-breadth taller than he, and erect as one of the lilies she clasped. The net that had covered her hair was drawn off with the hood and a great flood of silver-gold streamed about her in the dim light, framing the pale face and startling-blue eyes. Norse hair! The Danes had left their seed as far south as Cheshire, and planted this tall flower among them. She was no longer plain, tired, and resigned. In this dim but loving light, she shone in austere beauty. Just so must Brother Jordan's veiled eyes have seen her.

"Now I see!" said Cadfael. "You came into the Lady Chapel and

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shone upon our half-blind brother's darkness as you shine here. You are the visitation that brought him awe and bliss, and enjoined silence upon him for three days."

The voice he had scarcely heard speak a word until then, a voice level, low, and beautiful, said: "I made no claim to be what I am not. It was he who mistook me. I did not refuse the gift."

"I understand. You had not thought to find anyone there; he took you by surprise as you took him. He took you for Our Lady herself, disposing as she saw fit of what had been given her. And you made him promise you three days' grace." The lady had plunged her hands into the sack, yes, but Elfgiva had carried the pillow and a grain or two had filtered through the muslin to betray her.

"Yes," she said, watching him with unwavering blue eyes.

"So in the end you had nothing against him making known how the candlesticks were stolen." It was not an accusation, he was pursuing his way to understanding. But at once she said clearly: "I did not steal them. I took them. I will restore them—to their owner."

"Then you don't claim they are yours?"

"No," she said, "they are not mine. But neither are they FitzHamon's."

"Do you tell me," said Cadfael mildly, "that there has been no theft at all?"

"Oh, yes!" said Elfgiva, and her pallor burned into a fierce brightness, and her voice vibrated like a harp-string. "Yes, there has been a theft, and a vile, cruel theft, too, but not here, not now. The theft was a year ago, when FitzHamon received these candlesticks from Alard who made them, his villein, like me. Do you know what the promised price was for these? Manumission for Alard, and marriage with me, what we had begged of him three years and more. Even in villeinage we would have married and been thankful. But he promised freedom! Free man makes free wife, and I was promised, too. But when he got the fine works he wanted, then he refused the promised price. He laughed! I saw, I heard him! He kicked Alard away from him like a dog. So what was his due and denied him, Alard took. He ran! On St. Stephen's Day he ran!"

"And left you behind?" said Cadfael gently.

"What chance had he to take me? Or even to bid me farewell? He was thrust out to manual labor on FitzHamon's other manor. When his chance came, he took it and fled. I was not sad! I rejoiced! Whether I live or die, whether he remembers or forgets me, he is free. No, but in two days more he will be free. For a year and a day he will

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have been working for his living in his own craft, in a charter borough, and after that he cannot be haled back into servitude, even if they find him."

"I do not think," said Brother Cadfael, "that he will have forgotten you! Now I see why our brother may speak after three days. It will be too late then to try to reclaim a runaway serf. And you hold that these exquisite things you are cradling belong by right to Alard who made them?"

"Surely," she said. "Seeing he never was paid for them, they are still his."

"And you are setting out tonight to take them to him. Yes! As I heard it, they had some cause to pursue him towards London . . . indeed, into London, though they never found him. Have you had better word of him? *From* him?"

The pale face smiled. "Neither he nor I can read or write. And whom should he trust to carry word until his time is complete and he is free? No, never any word."

"But Shrewsbury is also a charter borough, where the unfree may work their way to freedom in a year and a day. And sensible boroughs encourage the coming of good craftsmen and will go far to hide and protect them. I know! So you think he may be here . . . and the trail laid towards London a false trail. True, why should he run so far, when there's help so near? But, daughter, what if you do not find him in Shrewsbury?"

"Then I will look for him elsewhere until I do. I can live as a runaway, too. I have skills, I can make my own way until I do get word of him. Shrewsbury can as well make room for a good seamstress as for a man's gifts, and someone in the silversmiths' craft will know where to find a brother so talented as Alard. I shall find him!"

"And when you do? Oh, child, have you looked beyond that?"

"To the very end," said Elfgiva firmly. "If I find him and he no longer wants me, no longer thinks of me, if he is married and has put me out of his mind, then I will deliver him these things that belong to him, to do with as he pleases, and go my own way and make my own life as best I may without him. And wish well to him as long as I live."

Oh, no . . . small fear she would be forgotten, not in a year, not in many years. "And if he is utterly glad of you, and loves you still?"

"Then," she said, gravely smiling, "if he is of the same mind as I, I have made a vow to Our Lady, who lent me her semblance in

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the old man's eyes, that we will sell these candlesticks where they may fetch their proper price, and that price shall be delivered to your almoner to feed the hungry. And that will be our gift, Alard's and mine, though no one will ever know it."

"Our Lady will know it," said Cadfael, "and so shall I. Now, how were you planning to get out of this enclave and into Shrewsbury? Both our gates and the town gates are closed until morning."

She lifted eloquent shoulders. "The parish doors are not barred. And even if I leave tracks, will it matter, provided I find a safe hiding-place inside the town?"

"And wait in the cold of the night? You would freeze before morning. No, let me think. We can do better for you than that."

Her lips shaped "*we?*" in silence, wondering, but quick to understand. She did not question his decisions, as he had not questioned hers. He thought he would long remember the slow, deepening smile, the glow of warmth mantling her cheeks. "You believe me!" she said.

"Every word. Here, give me the candlesticks, let me wrap them, and do you put up your hair again in net and hood. We've had no fresh snow since morning. The path to the parish door is well trodden; no one will know your tracks among the many. And, girl, when you come to the town end of the bridge there's a little house off to the left, under the wall, close to the gate. Knock there and ask for shelter over the night till the gates open, and say that Brother Cadfael sent you. They know me; I doctored their son when he was sick. They'll give you a warm corner and a place to lie, for kindness' sake, and ask no questions, and answer none from others, either. And likely they'll know where to find the silversmiths of the town, to set you on your way."

She bound up her pale, bright hair and covered her head, wrapping the cloak about her, and was again the maidservant in homespun. She obeyed without question his every word, moved silently at his back round the great court by way of the shadows, halting when he halted, and so he brought her to the church, and let her out by the parish door into the public street, still a good hour before Matins. At the last moment, she said, close at his shoulder within the half open door: "I shall be grateful always. Someday I shall send you word."

"No need for words," said Brother Cadfael, "if you send me the sign I shall be waiting for. Go now, quickly, there's not a soul stirring."

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She was gone, lightly and silently, flitting past the abbey gatehouse like a tall shadow, towards the bridge and the town. Cadfael closed the door softly and went back up the night stairs to the dortoir, too late to sleep but in good time to rise at the sound of the bell and return in procession to celebrate Matins.

There was, of course, the resultant uproar to face next morning, and he could not afford to avoid it, there was too much at stake. Lady FitzHamon naturally expected her maid to be in attendance as soon as she opened her eyes, and raised a petulant outcry when there was no submissive shadow waiting to dress her and do her hair. Calling failed to summon and search to find Elfgiva, but it was an hour or more before it dawned on the lady that she had lost her accomplished maid for good.

Furiously, she made her own toilet unassisted and raged out to complain to her husband, who had risen before her and was waiting for her to accompany him to Mass. At her angry declaration that Elfgiva was nowhere to be found and must have run away during the night, he first scoffed, for why should a sane girl take herself off into a killing frost when she had warmth and shelter and enough to eat where she was? Then he made the inevitable connection and let out a roar of rage.

"Gone, is she? And my candlesticks gone with her, I dare swear! So it was *she!* The foul little thief! But I'll have her yet, I'll drag her back, she shall not live to enjoy her ill-gotten gains!"

It seemed likely that the lady would heartily endorse all this; her mouth was already open to echo him when Brother Cadfael, brushing her sleeve close as the agitated brothers ringed the pair, contrived to shake a few grains of lavender onto her wrist. Her mouth closed abruptly. She gazed at the tiny things for the briefest instant before she shook them off, she flashed an even briefer glance at Brother Cadfael, caught his eye, and heard in a rapid whisper: "Madam, softly! Proof of the maid's innocence is also proof of the mistress's."

She was by no means a stupid woman. A second quick glance confirmed what she had already grasped, that there was one man here who had a weapon to hold over her at least as deadly as any she could use against Elfgiva. She was also a woman of decision, and wasted no time in bitterness once her course was chosen. The tone in which she addressed her lord was almost as sharp as that in which she had complained of Elfgiva's desertion.

"She your thief, indeed! That's folly, as you should very well know.

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The girl is an ungrateful fool to leave me, but a thief she never has been, and certainly is not this time. She can't possibly have taken the candlesticks. You know well enough when they vanished, and you know I was not well that night and went early to bed. She was with me until long after Brother Prior discovered the theft. I asked her to stay with me until you came to bed. *As you never did*," she ended tartly. "You may remember!"

Hamo probably remembered very little of that night; certainly he was in no position to gainsay what his wife so roundly declared. He took out a little of his ill-temper on her, but she was not so much in awe of him that she dared not reply in kind. Of course, she was certain of what she said! *She* had not drunk herself stupid at the lord abbot's table, she had been nursing a bad head of another kind, and even with Brother Cadfael's remedies she had not slept until after midnight, and Elfgiva had then been still beside her. Let him hunt a runaway maidservant, by all means, the thankless hussy, but never call her a thief, for she was none.

Hunt her he did, though with less energy now that it seemed clear he would not recapture his property with her. He sent his grooms and half the lay servants off in both directions to enquire if anyone had seen a solitary girl in a hurry. They were kept at it all day, but they returned empty-handed.

The party from Lidyate, less one member, left for home next day. Lady FitzHamon rode demurely behind young Madoc, her cheek against his broad shoulders; she even gave Brother Cadfael the flicker of a conspiratorial smile as the cavalcade rode out of the gates and detached one arm from round Madoc's waist to wave as they reached the roadway. So Hamo was not present to hear when Brother Jordan, at last released from his vow, told how Our Lady had appeared to him in a vision of light, fair as an angel, and taken away with her the candlesticks that were hers to take and do with as she would, and how she had spoken to him and enjoined on him his three days of silence. And if there were some among the listeners who wondered whether the fair woman had not been a more corporeal being, no one had the heart to say so to Jordan, whose vision was comfort and consolation for the fading of the light.

That was at Matins, at midnight of the day after St. Stephen's. Among the scattering of alms handed in at the gatehouse next morning for the beggars, there was a little basket that weighed surprisingly heavily. The porter could not remember who had brought it,

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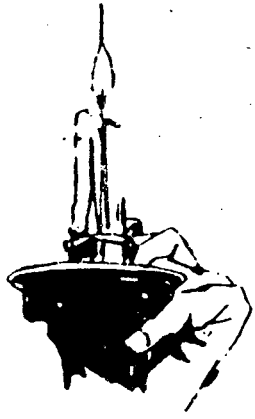
taking it to be some offerings of food or old clothing, like all the rest. But when it was opened it sent Brother Oswald, almost incoherent with joy and wonder, running to Abbot Heribert to report what seemed to be a miracle. For the basket was full of good coin, to the value of more than a hundred marks. Well used, it would ease all the worst needs of his poorest petitioners until the weather relented.

"Surely," said Brother Oswald devoutly, "Our Lady has made her own will known. Is not this the sign we have hoped for?"

Certainly it was for Cadfael, and earlier than he had dared to hope for it. He had the message that needed no words. She had found him and been welcomed with joy. Since midnight Alard the silversmith had been a free man, and free man makes free wife. Presented with such a woman as Elfgiva, he could give as gladly as she, for what was gold, what was silver, by comparison?



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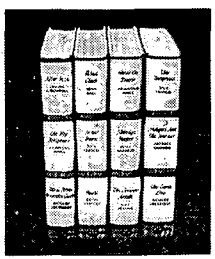

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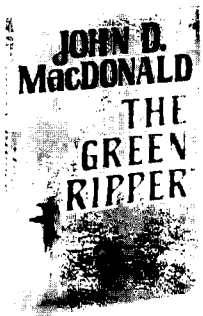

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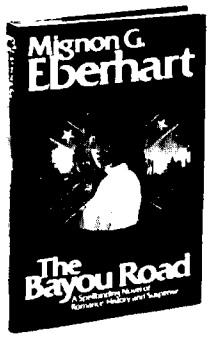

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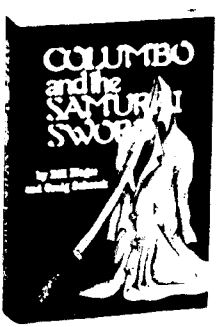

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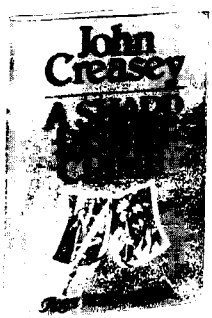

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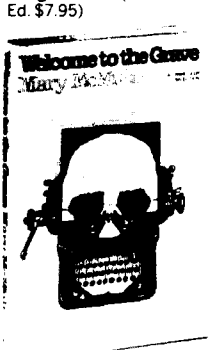

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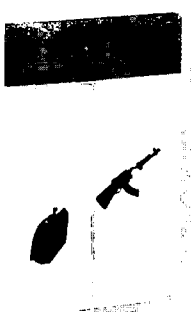

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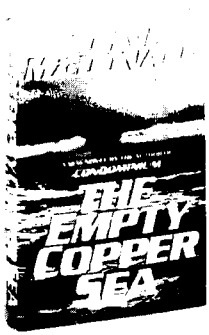

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